

Philip Fenton is at a loose end in London. He takes a snap decision and finds himself employed by the Sobosso Mining Company in West Africa. There he meets several groups uneasily co-existing—the tribe with its fetish grove, the European club, the few educated Africans, and Van Huyt, the Dutchman, and his enigmatic daughter. Philip strikes up a friendship with Davis, his head clerk. But a terrible event breaks up the inter-racial harmony and sends Fenton disillusioned home.



# THE VILLAGE IN THE TREES





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*by*

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## I

**E**IGHT days previously, at midnight, Mr. James Buachi Andrews, storekeeper, had been enstooled as Paramount Chief of Nyankwa under the name of Nana Buachi Abrempong IV; and twelve years of internal dissension in the state had been brought to an end.

The town was jubilant. The rumble of the state drums charged the air and heralded the stirring of a momentous event. People had left their hut-like dwellings and gone flocking to the palace in Cow Lane where the new chief would shortly appear, to be acclaimed by his subjects and escorted round the town. The sun, whose glare was softening as the afternoon advanced, emblazoned the many-coloured loose-hanging garments against their black skins and flashed on the taut silk headcloths of the women. The surging crowd was the most vital thing seen in Nyankwa for many a day. The people rejoiced, their eyes and teeth agleam to welcome the new ruler.

Seen from an aeroplane—though no aeroplane had yet had occasion to fly over Nyankwa—the town would have appeared as a tawny patch in an unending expanse of green. The soil was a yellowish brown clay, which formed all the streets and most of the houses. The roofs of corrugated iron sheets made a patchwork of rusty grey and away from the main street tortuous alleyways made an unplanned maze. Surrounding the town were low hills and spread over these hills and beyond was the African forest, immense and silent. Mists of vapour hung over it. Its silence was the silence of centuries long past.

The single-track railway which, after leaving Nyankwa, went meandering away into the hills seemed to have but a vague purpose of ever getting anywhere.

On a couch of leopard skins the chief was being carried from his palace. The couch was borne on the shoulders of sweating, half-naked attendants and he sat upright, his head held high, for all to see. A toga-like cloth of green and gold velvet lay in thick folds over one shoulder, leaving the other bare. Heavy gold bracelets decorated his arms and round his forehead was a piece of green cloth tied in a large knot behind. With the backward tilt of his head, his lips pushed forward and his long jaws, his mouth was like a trap which had just snapped tight. His nose was wide and flat. Without turning his head, without shifting it from its high angle, he sent quick, sidelong glances, the whites of his eyes glinting, at the mass of black, upturned faces that pressed round his gun-bearers, forcing them up against the couch. It was many years since the ex-storekeeper had visited his native town and he was perhaps a little apprehensive of the clamour which beset him.

Shouting and singing the people sent at him great waves of sound. Wherever they had space they danced in frenzied contortions as the state musicians pounded the long, barrel-like talking-drums which were carried horizontally on the heads of straining young men in the forefront of the procession. The notes merged into each other, tumbled over themselves and made a deep vibrating roar like the bubbling of an immense cauldron. They spoke a message of triumph, past victories in battle, praise for the chief and his prowess inherited from countless ancestors. Not always did they sound thus. "A mighty tree has fallen," had rumbled *fontomfrom*, the biggest drum of all, when the old chief died twelve years ago, while

the words "And smaller trees must fall also," had echoed ominously from the others.

But today they bid the crowd rejoice. The procession was moving slowly along Cow Lane; and against that brilliant scene, interspersed with the huge silk umbrellas of the elders and minor chiefs which made solid blobs of scarlet and blue, the forest which enclosed the town had put aside its sombre aspect and the plain mud walls of the houses had lost their drabness, perhaps for ever. For fine buildings would arise, the earth would be fertile, sickness would vanish, now that Buachi Abrempong had ascended the sacred stool of his maternal forebears. The drums said so. They were the pulse of Nyankwa beating with an irresistible vigour.

It was indeed a happy outcome. Most people, including a succession of ephemeral District Commissioners, had long despaired of any solution to Nyankwa's tangled affairs. When the old chief died, after embroiling his state in that most ruinous piece of litigation with the Adantas over fishing rights in the Sansu River—a matter which had perplexed even their lordships of the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council—there had been two candidates for the vacant stool. One was an old man. The other was a young boy. Neither had any money, which was essential if the mortgages on the various stool properties were not to be foreclosed. It was their hope of a rich chief which kept the moneylenders at a distance, for the crumbling palace was not worth much, nor were the stool farms, whose cocoa trees had been ravaged by disease since the loans were advanced against them. But if a man of straw were elected, the creditors, baulked of their interest more years than not, would sell everything up for what it would fetch. And this would have been a pity, for the Nyankwas were a proud people with high traditions. It was only sixty

years since a grateful Governor had given them a Union Jack for their help in defeating the rebellious Adantas across that self-same Sansu River, now lost in a miserable court action. They had the flagstaff still, an ebony stick six feet long surmounted by a gilt crown and rampant lion. It was on show today. It jutted out from one of the securer corners of the palace's upper balcony and a brand-new Union Jack hung down limply. Certainly the Nyankwas were not the people to submit tamely to bailiffs. But the twelve years passed slowly. Parts of the palace actually collapsed. Weeds appeared in the streets and open spaces, as if the encircling forest had begun to seep up into the town like a flood.

Progress languished. The Government's exhortations to the two rival parties to pool whatever resources of money and statesmanship might have been their were met with a shrug. The promised Government school did not materialise and went instead to Sobosso, the prosperous, energetic little town some forty miles away. That, if anything, should have stirred Nyankwa from its lethargy, since there was a long record of jealousy between the two towns. But the Nyankwas, it was generally agreed, did not try. They were hopeless. Expedients of doubtful morality to hold the more persistent of the moneylenders at bay were the only activity of an effete regency. The several volumes of the file labelled *Nyankwa Native Affairs* in the District Commissioner's office were put away on an obscure shelf where spiders and mildew descended on their yellowing and much-thumbed pages.

And then the Queen Mother, exercising her customary rights, nominated James Buachi Andrews. He was not in the direct line. There were many rumours to account for the choice. It was said to be the last desperate throw of the Queen Mother to get on the stool someone who would see she had a

proper funeral when the time came, as it must surely do soon. It was said to have been stimulated by the appearance, at long last, of a Notice of Sale on one of the dilapidated walls of the palace itself. The notice had of course been torn down by certain patriotic elements the next night, but it was an ugly symbol. No one believed that Mr. Andrews had made enough money by selling cotton prints and bottles of kerosene to discharge all the stool debts. But then it was said that a Greek trader in Nyankwa whose name passed as Mr. Asbestos had put up some money in the hope of getting a concession over part of the forest where there was believed to be mahogany. Anyway, the elders accepted the Queen Mother's nomination, for the old man was now very old indeed and the young boy had forfeited a good deal of support by becoming a Government policeman.

The chief linguist and his attendants made a long journey to the coast town where James Buachi Andrews kept his store, and James Buachi Andrews told them that if his people had summoned him to serve them then of course he had to answer their summons. The little party boarded the train, stopped off at the last village, and late at night entered the town. James Buachi Andrews then had to submit to a searching examination to show that he had no physical defects. He had to swear the Great Oath of Nyankwa that he had never been in prison or performed any menial tasks. By the light of a hurricane lamp three or four stalwart negroes lifted him up and raised and lowered him three times over the ancestral stool. He was then kept for eight days and nights in close confinement while the old men initiated him into the customs and duties of his office. Food cooked by women was forbidden him during this time. Nevertheless he fed very well and when he emerged before the public gaze he was a different man.

His cheeks had filled out, his skin had a gloss, his shoulders were round and smooth. It was as if he had been gently inflated.

The procession continued round the town. It came out of Cow Lane, where the small, box-like houses, their unplastered walls cracked and pock-marked, were crowded so closely together, and it was now moving along the main street, which was wider. Here some of the buildings were double-storeyed and had overhanging verandas which sagged dangerously. Others had been faced with cement which in places had fallen away, leaving brown patches where the mud showed. There were general stores which sold everything from an embroidered Mohammedan cap to enamel basins and bottles of patent medicines. Chief among these was the store of Mr. Asbestos, a trader with varied interests, some known and others suspected. He bought cocoa, sold petrol, ran a transport service of two lorries between Nyankwa and Adantakrom, and was food contractor to the Sobosso Mining Company.

Close at hand was the dressmaking establishment of Madam Amelia, whose name was painted in gold letters above the entrance, with 'Ladies' Leading Fashions' done in the form of a scroll. Madam Amelia's name was also associated with the ex-gold miner Van Huyt, who still lived on in his house on the European ridge, though his mine had been closed for several years.

With a right-hand curve the road then led down to the railway crossing, where it turned to the right sharply and ran parallel to the line, while the ground on the left, converted into a golf-course, sloped up again to the residential area where the cool white walls of half a dozen bungalows could be seen among the trees.



The route of the procession lay along this road. The rapid striking of metal cymbals had now been introduced into the drumming, so that the cavalcade had the sound of being driven from its midst by a thumping and clanking steam-engine, operating at high speed. It continued past the saw-mill of Messrs. Johnson and Holloway, where one or two trucks stood in the siding laden with massive logs, the bark still upon them; past the smart white building of the Guinea Bank with its scarlet-flowering creeper entwined across the entrance; past the station with its goods and cocoa sheds; past the yard of the Sobosso Mining Company, where large reddish piles of linxite lay waiting to be loaded. And then the forest closed down over the road and all signs of human activity ceased. It was like the entrance to a cave. The leaves and branches, which never saw the sun, did not stir. The drumming stopped and there was a cool hush.

A tunnel-like path led into the forest from the right-hand side of the road. It was guarded by a small figure in human form made of baked clay, placed there to warn strangers that this was no ordinary path. It was the way to the fetish grove, Nyankwa's sacred shrine.

The chief dismounted. He heaved up his green and gold cloth and set off down the path, a diminutive figure beneath the towering trees. He was followed by his elders and by a small band of men naked except for a straw skirt round their waists and carrying long knives. It would not do to follow them. The slaughter of twenty-four sheep is not a pleasing spectacle. Moreover, the fetish grove was infested with spirits. Not only the mighty Earth God Yamfu lived there, but countless other spirits who were easily offended. To venture in their midst without giving the priests a sacrifice was to imperil one's whole physical and spiritual welfare. So the

people waited, blackening the road against the green banks and arching trees.

When the procession began its return, the late afternoon sun showed the mud walls of the town in an orange glow, and shining across the golf-course to the ridge it struck a pinpoint of reflected light from a window among the trees. It was still above the dark edge of forest beyond the town, but already a purple haze was gathering to receive it. The air had lost its heat, but this did not make it fresh. It remained heavy like the air in a confined space. No breeze penetrated. The tangle of vegetation which skirted the golf-course on each side might have belonged in its stillness and high colouring to the scenery of some lavish theatrical production whose cast, garishly costumed, was passing in spirited cavalcade across the centre of the stage.

Just before it reached the level-crossing the procession was momentarily confused by a large black saloon which swept down on it from the residential area, making for the station. An elderly, heavy-featured European was in the back seat. At the same moment a signal, where the railway line appeared out of the forest from the south, fell abruptly.

## II

ALL day the train had been trundling up from Latuba, first across the narrow coastal plain and then through the forest. Delayed for an hour to accommodate the passengers disembarked from the English mail-boat, it had left Latuba at ten o'clock and had been stopping at every small station and wayside halt more as if its strength had failed than for any other visible reason.

The fair, keen-eyed young man who occupied one of the leather arm-chairs provided by the colonial railway for its first-class passengers moved restlessly. He was not at all sure that he had done the right thing by the porters who had handled his baggage at Latuba. He had given them a shilling shortly before the train left, but they had clustered round the carriage window jabbering and holding out their palms, their grotesque black faces all distorted. So before the eyes of the other two occupants of the compartment he had thrown them another shilling as the train steamed out and had turned sharply to his seat without watching the effect.

"A young man of character," he had been told by Mr. Cassap, General Manager of the West African Concessions Syndicate, in a third-storey office above the Strand a month ago. "That's what we're looking for. A young man of character."

Again Philip Fenton gave an uneasy fidget and fixed his attention through the window. This was it: this high barrier of green on either side of the line for mile after mile continually cutting short one's vision; this mass of entangled

foliage in silent struggle with itself, these primitive habitations which emerged fleetingly and slipped back into the trees; this was the country to which he had come.

Four weeks ago on a wet blustery morning the West African outline had confronted him in the form of an ungainly bulge on a wall-map in Mr. Cassap's London office. It had hung there, mute, imponderable, dominating, behind Mr. Cassap's head, holding Fenton's attention, while Mr. Cassap, smooth and obese, was speaking. Little paper flags were pinned into it to mark the Syndicate's properties.

"Recent developments," Mr. Cassap had explained across the desk in his most urbane manner, "have made it essential to send someone out immediately to take charge of our Nyankwa office."

The name was spoken casually, much as if it had been Newcastle or Birmingham. Mr. Cassap leaned forward a little.

"We should require you to sail in a fortnight."

At the thought of West Africa as a place to which he would actually be going Fenton had experienced strange emotions. The very name had an effect all its own. It carried an implication, backed by invisible forces, of dark mysteries, of something repellent yet simultaneously enticing. His first instinct had been to refuse. Such a place was not for him. Quickly he had protested his inexperience. But this Mr. Cassap by a shake of his head had swiftly discounted. Supervising the loading of railway wagons by native labour and keeping simple accounts. That was all the work amounted to. Simple but essential. A vital link in the chain.

The bulging outline on the wall was hypnotic. It made Mr. Cassap's office unaccountably drab. The gas-fire glowing beneath the map took on a ridiculous appearance. Through the rain-spotted windows the tall grey frontage of buildings

across the street seemed no more substantial than a cardboard façade.

After leaving Mr. Cassap he had gone slowly down the several flights of stairs, each step putting his acceptance farther beyond recall. He had stood on the pavement outside trying to accustom his mind, while the wheels of traffic went hissing over the wet street. A surge of raincoats and hastily lowered umbrellas pressed past him towards a waiting bus, which would have taken him to his lodgings. But he had stood back. He felt aloof from it and from the people. He had energy and excitement which he wanted to walk off. Hatless, his coat indifferently buttoned, he set off down the street at a rapid pace. Back in the hostel he had stood by his window looking down at the square. The grey buildings, the leafless trees, the sodden grass, were as if all the colours had run out and been washed away down the gutter. He was sailing in a fortnight. He would have left tomorrow, that very day.

The Sobosso Mining Company to which Mr. Cassap had offered him appointment was well known by its product, linxite. The discovery of this mineral in a British West African Colony had raised the hopes of thousands of homeless families in Britain who otherwise saw themselves lingering on waiting-lists for years. 'Houses For All Soon—What Linxite Means—Not Long Now, Expert Says'—such were the headlines. Scientists had known about linxite for years, but never before had it been discovered in sufficient quantities to be economically workable. It was now being hewn out of a West African hillside in thousands of tons. "Our most profitable subsidiary," Mr. Cassap had murmured.

Fenton was conscious of his luck. It was something to step into a concern with such possibilities. For three years he had been drifting aimlessly, unable to settle. He was now

tremendously pleased. He was also flattered, though people willing to go to West Africa were not so easy to find, perhaps, especially at short notice. Mr. Cassap had explained the urgency. The tempo of production had increased. No longer could the Nyankwa office be run by the assistant manager of the mine forty miles away in periodical visits. "We require someone on the spot continually. Our new contracts have made that essential." His large, pale, impassive face had seemed to stare out of the very midst of the unwieldy land mass depicted on the wall behind him. "Enough linxite to house half the population. Your job will be to help get it out."

He had given his new employee a firm, confidential nod, as if they were both engaged on some high enterprise together and could be depended upon not to let each other down. For the first time he had smiled. He had opened the door for Fenton with a flourish.

In the next few days there had been a medical examination, a series of injections against various diseases, a visit to a life insurance company (with no dependents Fenton had thought this a waste of time, but Mr. Cassap had insisted upon it as a normal condition of employment), and visits to a tropical outfitter. In the arrangement of these matters Mr. Cassap's office staff had been most helpful and had treated Fenton with the deference due to somebody going out to one of the Syndicate's West African properties. And on a day of damp mists he had gone on board the ship at Liverpool, and there in the forward saloon where passengers already embarked were having tea before a pseudo log-fire he saw the fans. They hung from the ceiling, their large wooden blades motionless. The sight struck home. They were a still, silent indication. Nyankwa and the Sobosso Mining Company had suddenly moved very near.

Fenton was never at ease among strangers and during the

voyage he did not mix with his fellow-passengers, linked together as they were by topics of conversation in which he had no part. He was also put off by their appearance of forced hilarity, their over-conscious efforts to make the best of things, which grew more and more marked as the ship neared the tropics. For he remained tremendously pleased with his prospects and feared to have them dimmed. There was, for example, the episode on the second morning at sea when he was joined while strolling on the foredeck before breakfast by a tall burly man with a thick, red mustache, thick overcoat and thick tweed cap. On hearing that Fenton was destined for Nyankwa he had paused in the act of drawing a pipe from one of the pockets of his enormous coat before saying, in a markedly Scots accent and with widening eyes:

"Nyankwa? Aye! That's a bad spot. Mike Hobden was there the last time I was through. Ye'll be taking his place, I suppose. Poor devil!"

The faint ringing echoes of a gong from between decks had sent him hurrying below with a "That'll be the breakfast," and Fenton was spared any further commiseration. But the episode remained in his mind and he did not visit that part of the deck before breakfast again. There was no other chance of an encounter with the man because he was a cards addict who spent the day playing with the same three companions in the same corner of the smoke-room right through the voyage. It must have been an absorbing game. Whether they ever finished it or had had enough of it by the time the ship went alongside at Latuba, or whether it was merely adjourned for the return voyage in eighteen months' time, was a matter for speculation. Fenton last glimpsed him going down the gangway followed by an African porter struggling gamely with his coat. "I've business in Latuba," Fenton would say to anyone

else who chose to enquire, and showed by his manner that further questions were unwelcome. If Nyankwa really was a plague-spot, at least no one was going to have the pleasure of enlightening him.

After disembarking at Latuba he had joined the pandemonium in the customs shed, where native porters in ragged garments clustered round him chattering incomprehensibly and black-faced customs officials in khaki uniforms and oversized sun-helmets shouted wildly at each other amid the multitudinous piles of baggage. The arrival of a ship in a West African port is still something to which no one seems to have grown accustomed. He had stood by his boxes at a complete loss, knowing no one, wondering how to set about the next stage of his journey to Nyankwa. It was Shorcliff who had rescued him; Shorcliff, the stocky, red-faced agent of the Sobosso Mining Company in Latuba. He had appeared out of the mêlée and taken complete charge.

"They're my own boys," he declared when Fenton demurred at the sight of two or three barefooted Africans walking off with some of his baggage. "They'll put it on the train for you. Done it dozens of times. No need to worry. . . . So you're going to Nyankwa, are you? They offered me that job, you know. But I wouldn't take it." His sharp little eyes were like a ferret's. "Not likely! Little bit of hell served up hot, that's what Nyankwa is. When you've been there you'll find even this place cool. We'd better get out of here and find you a seat in the train."

As they went along the platform outside the customs shed where a line of railway carriages were waiting, he showed himself as a man with a grievance. Pausing for Fenton to draw level he spoke in confidential tones.

"They don't give me a square deal, you know. The manage-



ment, I mean. No consideration. The stuff comes down twice a day now. I've got to load it. And suppose there's no ship. Don't think of that, do they? Up in the bush they've got the whole of bloody Africa to stack it in. But down it has to come. Twice a day. Special rates from the railway, see? And what have I got down here? About as much space as a back yard in the Mile End Road. Two hundred tons came down this morning and it's still in the trucks. And when I tell them for the sake of crying out loud to hold it up . . . Look," he pleaded, "see what you can do, if you? I'll give you enough notice to tell the railway. And when I say hold it up, hold it up, will you?"

"I'll do what I can," replied Fenton, his eyes straying. Out in the harbour a ship with an awning over her foredeck was moving slowly seawards while one or two motor-boats went cutting past her stern. Beneath the unclouded sky every object had a hardness of outline and clarity of detail which affronted the eye. There was nothing to soften or mitigate. The sun was ruthless. It bore down upon the stone surface of the quay, burnished the railway line running shorewards to the town, and dappled the sea with a brassy glitter.

"This do you?" asked Shorcliff, halting by a half-empty compartment. "You'll be leaving in half an hour. Sorry I can't stop, but your company's not the only one I act for down here, though it gives me the most trouble. You'll find your baggage in the van at the end. Cheerio!"

Fenton entered the carriage. He was swaty and dispirited. Shorcliff's departure had been curiously abrupt, suggesting that it was not only pressure of business which had taken him off.

The train pursued its dilatory course inland. The other occupants of the compartment showed no interest in its

progress. Certainly the vast wilderness of green could not have changed in their absence. They had in fact fallen into a stupor, their collars loosened and their heads askew. The smoke from the engine kept low over the train, as if buoyancy in that atmosphere was impossible, and the choice in the carriage was between airlessness and fumes from a very inferior type of coal. By tacit consent the window was closed and thus it remained throughout the journey, screening off the occupants and setting them apart from the exterior scene.

The country had an air of watchfulness. In the confused mass of vegetation and in the spread of closely packed trees of which the undulating ground gave occasional glimpses there was a suggestion of waiting, of latent power, as of some great animal which watched patiently but which would not watch for ever. Illustrations of the country which he had seen in hasty visits to public libraries before sailing had given him a mental picture of half-tones and dark shades. Positive colour he had not imagined. It had seemed a country without sunlight. But the forest was cut back on either side of the embankment so that the intervening bushes and undergrowth received the full force of the sun and showed as a most brilliant green which continually surprised.

In the neighbourhood of villages small areas along the sloping banks of streams had been cleared by cultivators and here jagged stumps of trees scarred by the burning, pointed in isolation. Native crops covered the ground in shapeless patches and sometimes there was a black figure stripped to the waist and bent double, hacking at the soil with a short-handled hoe. At the edge of the clearings the trees in their smooth white bark stood tall and erect, their branches splayed out at the top in a majestic sweep some two hundred feet above the ground.

By the streams there were village women washing clothes, and the brown shining bodies of the children as they splashed in the water made the only refreshing sight of the journey. They stood up to wave as the train crossed the bridge above them while the women, some with babies straddled on their backs, continued to wash out their clothes and spread them on the grass. Had he been alone in the carriage, Fenton would have lowered the window and waved back. As it was, he looked down on them with a half-smile, turning his head as the scene receded and trying to realise that he really was in this country with a part to play in it. He could, of course, play that part and remain as much of a spectator as he was behind the glass window of the railway carriage. The loading of linxite into wagons called for no participation or even interest in the life that would surround him. That was, no doubt, the safest way; the way of detachment, of complete aloofness from all which did not concern the job to be done. One kept in one's own circle, and if one stepped outside it one invited complications. Fenton had never had to contend with complications. He had never had to deal with a situation. To everybody but himself he had never been more than a name on a card passed from one educational establishment to another as his age-group changed. There had been a spell of national service, everything thoughtfully provided, and periods of civil employment into which he had been assisted by various official agencies. All his problems had been worked out for him under a system that operated as smoothly and impartially as an automatic calculator. But this process no longer sheltered him. Mr. Cassap had picked him out of it. A life of complete novelty about which he had no preconceived notions lay before him, and in the presence of these mighty trees and vistas of receding forest he felt that he was faced with a challenge.

The train drew into Nyankwa a few minutes after five. As it passed over the level-crossing before the station he caught sight of a long procession moving to the right up the incline to the centre of the town. A gaudily dressed figure was being carried apparently shoulder-high and all round him were the black heads of people performing a sort of dance. But then a saw-mill and long warehouses of black corrugated iron intervened and the platform was at hand.

Here also was someone to meet him. With a cigarette between his fingers he came shouldering his way through the crowd which surged forward to the third-class carriages. About thirty-five, he was a tall figure in a khaki helmet frayed at the brim, and shirt and shorts of the same colour which hung about him loosely.

"You'll be Fenton. I'm Gerard. Nice people, aren't they?"

He indicated the crowd with a disdainful glance. The downward turn of his lips gave him a depreciatory expression. His face was round and sallow and beneath dark eyebrows his eyes had a detached, disinterested look.

"The usual bloody journey, I suppose. Better see to your loads."

Without turning to see whether Fenton followed he led the way unhurriedly to the luggage van. Women with shrill voices and white staring eyes were struggling to get into the train with great baskets of plantains and corncocks. Fenton could feel the pressure of their hot perspiring bodies, but he kept trying to push through, his eyes fixed on Gerard ahead. When his baggage was at last unloaded and being piled on to trolleys he stood apart, looking through the station railings to the yard where lorries waited and beyond, across the green open space of golf-course, to the upper slopes where nothing moved and the trees had a cool, refreshing aspect, like an English park.

"You'll have to go straight into the bungalow," said Gerard. "You don't mind, do you?"

"Does it leak or something?"

"Couldn't say. I've been putting up in the rest-house myself."

Gerard turned a little abruptly and followed the trolleys, which were now being pushed towards the station exit. When they were in the yard Gerard paused and looked behind him.

"Where are your servants? Are they about somewhere?"

"I haven't got any servants."

Africans in native costumes who were passing in and out of the station gave inquisitive glances at the two Europeans who stood facing each other in the centre of the yard, the one tall in ill-fitting khaki and the other not so tall in a white helmet and white trousers and with a jacket over one arm.

"You mean Shorcliff never fixed you up?"

In raising a cigarette to his mouth, Gerard paused.

"He never mentioned the matter."

"My God! And how do you propose to get boys in this place? Latuba—that's where they all go to look for work. No one ever stays around here when his job's finished—except Van Huyt. I asked Shorcliff to fix you up."

He threw down his cigarette and walked over to a lorry marked SOBOSSO MINING COMPANY. He sat down on the running-board and pushed his frayed helmet to the back of his head while the driver, who had been lying sprawled across the wheel, climbed down and began to supervise the loading of the lorry. From somewhere in the town came the persistent rumble of drums.

"I thought there was something odd about Shorcliff," said Fenton. "I suppose he was too busy to do anything about it and didn't want to mention it."

"Busy? That little rat? Too busy knocking it back in the

Sailors' Rest—that's the only thing he's ever busy at. Did he try to tell you to get his permission before sending down any linxite? I'll bet he did."

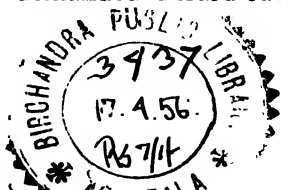
Nothing was said on the way up to the bungalow. Fenton would have liked to ask questions—about the procession he had seen or about the drumming—but the terseness of Gerard's manner restrained him. In not having any servants he felt that Gerard thought him a nuisance. Yet as the lorry struggled up the rough gravel road which flanked the golf-course to the bungalows he looked about him with a sense of elation. He had arrived. Overhead were the slender emerald branches of trees coloured with scarlet flowers. On the left the grass was rank and uncut and stretched away towards the bush on the outskirts of the forest, while to the right of the road the ground fell away into the golf-course, a depression of gilded green where all the rays of the sun seemed concentrated and where one or two white-clad players were walking slowly up the opposite slopes.

"This is the place," said Gerard as the lorry turned in to a bungalow on the left. "I hope you like it."

Fenton got out of the lorry and stood looking up at the bungalow. It was raised off the ground by thick white pillars of concrete. Its walls were of timber, painted grey, and its iron roof was a faded red. Wooden steps led up to the front door, which stood open. The windows consisted of jalousies hinged at the top and propped open at different angles according to the length of their wooden supports.

Trees hung over the roof at each end. On the grass space between the drive and the hedge were a few bushes of mauve and scarlet bougainvillæa. The golden tinge of evening was upon them. Not a leaf stirred.

"And what the devil do you want?" demanded Gerard sud-



denly, turning on an African who was watching from behind the pillars under the bungalow. "I thought I told you to clear out of here."

From behind the pillars the eyes in the dark face were like dim spots of light seen through the trees at night.

"Hobden's boy," explained Gerard. "Of course you wouldn't want *him*. I've told him to get out dozens of times."

The boy continued to stare with the steadfastness of an ebony image.

"What's wrong with him?" Fenton asked. "I don't mind taking him on if Hobden doesn't want him." It was the final difficulty resolved, this fortuitous appearance of a seemingly disengaged servant.

Gerard was looking at him curiously. Then he laughed—an unpleasant sound, harsh and derisive.

"If Hobden doesn't want him! That's a good one! If Hobden doesn't want——"

He laughed again. But as Fenton stared dumbly the laugh disappeared from Gerard's face and was followed by a slowly dawning look of amazed understanding.

"Hobden shot himself here. In this bungalow. Couple of months ago. Didn't you know?"

### III

THE words sent the truth sweeping over him like a flood, and he stood motionless, staring into Gerard's eyes, which confronted him from beneath the worn brim of the sun-helmet. Then, his gaze shifted and fixed on one of the scarlet bougain-villæ bushes on the grass before him, while the labourers began unconcernedly dropping his boxes off the end of the lorry with thuds of unequivocal finality.

He had been tricked. There was no other word, and the smooth fat countenance of Mr. Cassap recurred once more to his mind. It mocked him. He had been tremendously pleased, and the reasons for all that speed and efficiency with which he had been engaged and despatched were all too clear. They hadn't wanted him to find out. There had doubtless been others who had gone after this job, got a hint at the last moment of something queer, and withdrawn; and now they still had under their feet the firm feel of London's pavements and on all sides the reassurance of familiar sights, while he, Fenton, had been brought up against this sinister reality. Of course Cassap had not told him. In other circumstances one might step into a suicide's place without qualms, but when the event occurred three thousand miles away in a country of ill-repute one hesitated. He had been given no chance to hesitate. He had been tremendously pleased, he had been flattered by his success, he had jumped in with both feet, and now the basis of his satisfaction had been knocked away. He had been made a fool of. Mr. Cassap would be priding himself on a smart piece of business. Again he caught Gerard's



eyes and could see that Gerard was summing him up, watching his reactions.

He asked for no details. Ruthlessly he set himself, there and then, against making any enquiries. He turned suddenly and going up the wooden steps of the bungalow crossed over the threshold. "You might tell the boy to bring up my things," he called down to Gerard. His tone was peremptory. He had decided to take the boy on and he was not going back on that now under the impact of Gerard's revelation and subsequent scrutiny. There was a short pause before Gerard passed the order on. Then the boy, in white singlet and khaki shorts, began heaving the boxes up the steps. He needed no further instructions. He knew where to put everything.

There was an acrid smell in the bungalow. "We had the place fumigated," said Gerard, who had followed him in. "The effects still hang around."

The bungalow was not large. The dining-cum-sitting-room was L-shaped, going round two sides of the bungalow, and the bedroom, partitioned off by walls which did not reach the ceiling, occupied the rest of the floor-space. The walls were a dull yellow. The floor-boards were unpolished and in one place there was a small patch of discoloration where the fumigating sulphur had burned. There were no carpets, cushions or hangings of any kind, and the tables, chairs and empty bookcases stood about haphazardly.

He accepted Gerard's offer of a cup of tea in the rest-house. He would rather have remained alone, but only by striving to appear unaffected could he face this challenge. He had been all day in the train. Of course he needed a cup of tea. So he walked over with Gerard, whose readiness to disclose all the details was not concealed by his casual, off-hand manner.

"No one knows why he did it. Left no letter or anything.

There's something in this country which gets people. One of our best men too. I knew him as well as anyone. He'd saved a bit of money and had made all his plans to retire."

Gerard waited, evidently expecting some sign of curiosity, but Fenton would not humour him.

"No business of mine," Gerard continued presently, "but I don't think I'd keep on that boy, if I were you."

"Oh? Is he supposed to have hounded him to his death or something?"

The deliberate jocularity gave Gerard a cheek, but he continued presently:

"Nothing was ever proved. But he knows something. You can see it in his face. The police did their best with him, but he wouldn't talk. There's a way these people have of keeping their mouths shut when they know something. You'll find it for yourself. The bastards."

They sat on the rest-house veranda with a tea-tray between them, looking towards the metallic grey spread of roofs in the town and the red-flushed residue of daylight where the sun had gone down behind the hills. Fenton said nothing, while Gerard sat low in his chair with his legs stretched out. "But surely you must have known," he exclaimed suddenly. "Surely someone must have told you." But Fenton refused to be drawn. He let the remark go by and as naturally as he could put one or two questions about the mine. Gerard's mood changed to one of keenness.

"It's the achievement of one man," he said, pitching his cigarette across the veranda. "Unless you count the bloke who discovered the stuff. But no one thinks of him any more. He got killed in Burma. After him it was Fisher who started the thing. He was about the only man who could have done it. I can't stand the fellow myself. Too damned pleased with

himself. But then I live with him, on the top of the ruddy hill. He had nothing to start with. No labour, no equipment, no lorries, scarcely a hand-cart or pick or shovel. After the war you just couldn't get them. And our precious head office in London trying to do the thing on the cheap didn't want to spend any money. They weren't sure how it was going to turn out.

"It's an outlandish spot. Forty miles away in the most god-awful country. Fisher had to clear the forest, build some sort of accommodation, put a road up the hillside—the so-and-so government road only goes to Sobosso village and they said it wasn't safe to take it any farther—maybe they're right. Well, if I say he was getting the stuff out with his bare hands at one time I shouldn't be far wrong.

"He organised labour from the north, scrounged some old army lorries, badgered the railway for this tin-pot little siding we've got here, badgered the harbour people for loading facilities, and the shipping companies. He had the hell of a time. No one thought the stuff was any good, you see—at first. The Government thought it was some kind of a ramp. The sight of a lot of energy frightens 'em. So they'd only approve a lease of the property for ten years in the first instance—some idea of protecting native rights, I suppose—but who'd put money into a mine on that basis? And there's millions of tons in those hills and an insatiable demand."

He paused, looking away towards the darkening town.

"Millions of tons," he repeated. "But there's a dead hand on anything one tries in this country. It'll get the mine in the end. But what the hell! Come over to the club and have a drink."

## IV

THERE had been a time, twenty years ago, when the European residents in Nyankwa exceeded fifty. Those were the great days, when the representatives of a score of mining companies and trading firms lived on the ridge or in the town, when nearly all the principal Government departments had officers permanently stationed there, and when entertainment in that forest-bound locality was on the most lavish scale and a byword throughout the colony. After sundown in those days the residential area was an array of lights, very different from now. There was a monthly dance at the club to the music of a band specially brought up from Latuba. There were golf and tennis tournaments whose relics in the form of pewter mugs, suitably inscribed, still decorate the sideboards of many of the colony's older residents who have not yet retired; and of many more, now in the United Kingdom, who have. Every day the Union Jack hung from the flagstaff before the District Commissioner's great barn-like residence which, being the oldest of the bungalows, stood in the centre of the ridge overlooking the golf-course and the town; and every day at six o'clock, to the accompaniment of the police orderly's bugle, the flag was lowered.

Stories both true and apocryphal are still current of life in Nyankwa at that time. There was a small group called the 'Week-enders' who assembled at the club on Saturday mornings at eleven-thirty and stayed there till an early hour on the Sunday, when they were called for by their solicitous steward-boys, escorted home, and reappeared for a round of golf before

breakfast a few hours later—continuing at the club from mid-day onwards. There was the District Commissioner who tried to insist that golfers paused in their game while the flag was being lowered at six o'clock, but he stayed only a short time. There was the man in the survey party for the projected railway to Adantakrom who forced his cook to eat one of his own steamed puddings and then, returning to the bungalow some hours later, found himself locked out and the cook in possession, armed with his master's shot-gun. And many other anecdotes equally credible.

All this changed. There was found to be less gold in the area than had been supposed. The only man who did do well out of the gold business was Van Huyt, who made a lucky strike of alluvial gold near the source of the Sansu River. But the other companies fell by the wayside. One by one the workings were closed down and the machinery for which no market existed was left to rust away in the bush which soon overran the sites of so much costly speculation. The West African Concessions Syndicate itself lost heavily on a mine near Bipiasi, and a capital reconstruction became necessary. The depression of the early 'thirties killed the scheme for a railway to Adantakrom and also put out of business most of the trading firms. Names famous in the history of West African trade, whose bare mention had the flavour of the days of sail and cannon and white forts along the coast, disappeared. On the ridge at Nyankwa bungalows became derelict. Later, the war compelled economies in staff and Nyankwa ceased to be a separate administrative district. The District Commissioner, the Medical Officer, the District Engineer and other officers were withdrawn and, instead, Nyankwa was administered from Adantakrom fifty miles away and reached by atrocious roads.

Nyankwa languished and the number of Europeans dwindled to half a dozen. The club opened only on Saturdays. Little evidence of past glories remained. Van Huyt, for reasons much speculated upon, still occupied his large and well-appointed bungalow behind the District Commissioner's, though he was no longer producing gold. Old Dave Mackinnon, sole surviving 'Week-ender', was still the local manager of the Guinea Bank. There were also the stone double-storey buildings of the defunct trading concerns, much discoloured by neglect, which gave the High Street an air of battered respectability. But for Nyankwa's future progress there seemed no hope.

And then came the discovery of linxite. It was an odd story. In 1941 the military authorities sent a reconnaissance party into the hills west of Nyankwa a few miles from the French frontier. Relations with the adjoining French territories were delicate at that time and those charged with the colony's defence wished to be better acquainted with the nature of the ground. The party must have had a terrible time, living in tents, hacking through virgin bush, climbing up steep hillsides beneath the dripping trees. It included a young officer who in civilian life was a geologist. He was an intelligent youth who thought of other things than colonial defence, even when the going was hardest. He had an eye for the formation of rocks, the nature of the soil. When the reconnaissance was over he applied for a fortnight's leave—it was easily agreed he had earned it—and went down to Latuba, where he interviewed the local representative of the West African Concessions Syndicate. A day or two later he returned to those forbidding, forest-covered hills ostensibly on a shooting expedition. In Nyankwa, where he passed the night, it was assumed that he was on a secret mission across the frontier and the words

'field security', 'intelligence', were whispered about by the Europeans who still remained. There was drama, but of a different kind. He took back with him to Latuba a wooden box with rock and soil specimens all carefully labelled.

A few months later the West African Concessions Syndicate applied to the Chief of Sobosso for a concession over the hills for the mining of 'gold and other minerals'. From those who noticed the transaction there came a pitying smile. They remembered the fiasco of the Bipiassi mine. Gold-mining in that area had ceased to be looked upon even as a joke. The young geologist was forgotten. He was drafted to Burma soon afterwards and did not return. The Syndicate, mobilising its liquid resources, formed a subsidiary, the Sobosso Mining Company, to work the concession. The Sobosso Mining Company itself formed a subsidiary, Linxite Fabrications, to process the raw material in England. Nothing much could be done until the war ended. Then things began to stir.

Mining operations caused the influx into the area of many thousands of pounds in wages and other expenditure and the wheels of trade in Nyankwa, being the railhead for Sobosso, began to turn again. The great company in Latuba which had taken over such assets as remained of the small trading concerns which had failed in the 'thirties caught the whiff of profits like a setter after game and put in a European manager to develop its interests. Several Government departments reopened their Nyankwa offices. There was once more a Sanitary Superintendent, there were rumours of a District Commissioner being reappointed though this, to certain highly nationalist elements in the town, might have appeared as a retrograde step. An Inspector of Works came in to make up the roads, especially the one to Sobosso, which would now have to carry much heavy traffic. One way and another the number

of European residents rose to a dozen, in addition to those at the mine forty miles away, who sometimes came in to Nyankwa for relaxation. The club began to open more frequently.

Fenton met some of the members that first evening. It was dark by the time he and Gerard reached the club, where six or seven of them were sitting in cane chairs round a single table, in the open. Their white shirts showed dully and the pressure-lamp in the single-storey club-house a few yards away struck small scintillating gleams from the glasses in their hands. There was no vacant chair and Gerard called sharply to the white-uniformed steward-boy who with a bottle in each hand was moving round the table. Fenton was introduced to the members, but he could not follow all the names or distinguish their features. They rose to shake hands, shadowy figures without identity. There was a Williams, a Stanley Bull, a Dave Mackinnon, a few more, and then they subsided into their chairs and resumed their conversation. But Fenton did not listen. Thoughts of Hobden's suicide returned to his mind with redoubled force. Why had it happened? In which room? But he would not ask for details. He would let them think he did not care. When a chair was brought he sat quietly while the steward filled a glass on the table before him. Once again there sounded from the town the muffled rhythm of drums which had been in his ears ever since his arrival.

In front the ground fell away into the dark gulf that was the golf-course and straight across on the opposite side was a solitary light marking his bungalow. Unpacked from his baggage and lit with long-practised skill by his new servant, it shone steadily, and made a dot of gold in all that dark immensity. He became aware of other sounds—the buzzing of crickets, the distant call of screech-owls in the forest. But over and above there hung a silence, an infinite stillness, which not



even the conversation or the drumming really disturbed. It was so much greater than they, covering vast unseen distances and reaching back through long ages. The noise of the twentieth century had not yet burst upon it. The little group outside the club might have been poised on the brink of a great emptiness.

"Why do we have to sit in this infernal darkness?" asked somebody. "Boy! Bring light!"

The boy came carrying a tall wooden lamp-stand, ran back to the club-house and returned with the lamp. The group round the table was then illuminated and Fenton found them all looking at him. The glances were quickly withdrawn, but for an instant Fenton felt himself the target of six pairs of eyes scrutinising and summing him up.

"Have a good trip out?" came a deep-toned voice by his side. The man was stout, his large head was round and bald, and the smallish eyes were good-humoured. But in them too was the look of scrutiny.

"It was all right," said Fenton casually.

"Jack Thompson was on our boat, wasn't he?" The question was shot at him from the other end of the table by a small, aggressive-looking man with a black moustache. Fenton sensed animosity.

"Perhaps. I didn't meet him."

"Didn't meet Jack Thompson? You came out on the *Taiiku*, didn't you? Wasn't Jack Thompson on the *Taiiku*?" the aggressive-looking man demanded of his neighbour.

"He was so," replied a thick Scots voice with great deliberation. "He telephoned me from Latuba this very afternoon."

"There you are, then."

Once again the six pairs of eyes regarded him.

"I dare say he was one of the passengers," said Fenton,

looking from face to face. "I just didn't meet him, that's all."

He couldn't keep the edge from his voice, though he knew he was making a bad impression, failing to mix in, establishing himself as one to whom they would have to be careful what they said. By some light-hearted remark he might even then have put matters right. But that was beyond him. Why in Heaven's name should he be expected to know Jack Thompson? Was he the individual who had addressed him that morning on the foredeck? He knew now the import of his "Poor devil!"

The immediate tension passed. General conversation was resumed, though Gerard continued to lie back in his chair without speaking. He was still in the same bush attire of khaki shorts and shirt and he sat with legs outstretched in an attitude of utter disregard.

"This drumming," said Fenton to the man who had first spoken to him. "Is it an all-night performance?"

The stout man turned quickly, in some surprise at being addressed.

"Drumming? Yes, I expect so. But you'll get used to it. They've been electing a new chief or something. Or maybe it's a funeral. Some sort of celebration, anyway." He gave a deep chuckle. "Some of them will be lying about in drains tomorrow, I should think."

"What's that about drains?" asked someone two or three chairs away. "You been falling in drains again, Stanley?"

"He made them, didn't he?" put in somebody else. "Why shouldn't he fall in them if he wants to?"

"Very good drains they are too," said Stanley Bull. "Broad and deep. Very dry this time of year, except for the usual insanitary trickle. I made them as drains, you know, not the

other thing. You people in the Health Department don't do your job."

This remark, aimed at the resident Sanitary Superintendent, Williams, the little dark man, caused laughter.

"What do you expect?" he demanded. "The whole bloody country's nothing but an open-air urinal."

The white-uniformed steward-boy continued to move about between the chairs, silent and impersonal. Intently he would bend over the table to fill each glass in turn, his lower lip protruding, on his cheeks a dusky sheen. The glitter in his eyes when he turned towards the lamp was the only sign that the impassive face lived. Otherwise it was akin to the darkness which pressed round the small circle of light. Fenton watched him as if he were a being from another world, while the members of the Nyankwa European Club continued their easy-toned conversation. Presently the boy returned to the club-house for more refreshment and Fenton, looking across once more towards his bungalow, saw the solitary light go out.

It disappeared as neatly as if a shutter had been dropped over it. It was like the extinction at sea of a light by which one had been steering. He had an impulse to exclaim, "My light's gone out," and to go running round to the other side of the ridge to investigate. But he checked himself. It would have been a senseless remark. All that happened was a start in his chair which passed unnoticed. An alleged recipe for making bitters out of kola-nuts was at that moment engaging members' attention. Of course his boy, Hobden's boy, had finished his work and turned out the light. Hobden would have taught him economy. Already he was picturing Hobden as a quiet, methodical type of man. Wasn't it often just that type who . . . well, one could conceal or suppress emotions and keep up some sort of façade for a time, but if one began

to wonder whether the effort was worth while and one had nothing to hold on to, the realisation of futility might be insupportable.

"Van Huyt?" said Gerard, speaking for the first time in reply to someone's question. "He's gone to Kurakešsie. I saw him on the platform when meeting our friend here."

"And Rita?" asked Stanley Bull. "Did she go too?"

"No. He was by himself."

"Slipped the chain, has he? Good for the old man. But he oughtn't to leave her alone."

"Not with you about," Williams put in.

Stanley Bull ignored the ensuing levity.

"She doesn't look well to me, that girl," he continued. "Van Huyt ought to send her home."

"He ought to send himself home," Gerard declared with sudden asperity. "Why does he stay here? Made his money, hasn't he? Anyone with a tenth of what he's got would clear out by the first boat."

"Van Huyt's not finished with this country yet," said Stanley Bull. "He's still got a few chestnuts to pull out of the fire before he goes."

"Of course," was Gerard's impatient comment as he began getting up. "His soap-making experiments, candles from cocoa-butter, bricks and tiles from local clay and what have you. All highly profitable undertakings, no doubt, and worth about twopence halfpenny. Coming along?" he asked Fenton.

Over the evening meal in the rest-house ("You'd better eat with me tonight. That boy of yours won't have cooked you up anything yet.") Gerard told Fenton more about Van Huyt.

"Worth the best part of a million, so they say. His daughter's been out here about six months. There was a fine palaver when she arrived."

"Oh?"

Gerard grinned.

"She discovered her father had an African mistress—Madam Amelia, who makes dresses in the town and darns the socks of lonely bachelors like you and me. You're not married, are you? Well, she found Madam Amelia hanging about the house one day and booted her out. It must have been the hell of a scene. I don't know whether they actually came to blows. Accounts vary. Anyway, the old man's had to reform his ways. He wants to send her back to England, of course. But she's supposed to be determined not to go without him. One sees why."

"Is there a Mrs. Van Huyt?"

"There was. But she died in England. The girl was looking after her. Then she came out here, a bit unexpectedly, I believe. Old Van Huyt was rather caught on the wrong foot."

"But what does he do? Does he just stay here because——?"

"I told you at the club. He's trying to establish some local industries. A rich man's hobby. Boy!"

"Yessah!"

"Pump the lamp."

Under the steward-boy's vigorous pumping the room's illumination mounted in small jerks, showing the forehead of Gerard's round, sallow face lined in a frown. He waited until the boy had gone out before speaking again.

"You might as well know. He's after the linxite mine. That's what really makes him tick."

"He wants to take it over?"

Gerard nodded.

"He's been in this neighbourhood thirty years, first as a sort of beachcomber and now as a bloody millionaire. And he can't get over the fact that we got the linxite and he didn't."

"But surely he's too late now!"

Gerard shrugged. Even now he did not seem to have said everything in his mind, but Fenton was a newcomer not yet to be fully trusted, perhaps.

"I don't know—with all that money behind him—high finance—anyway you'd better be careful of him. He may start asking you questions."

The steward-boy returned at that moment with the coffee and Gerard began to talk about the programme for the next day.

Fenton left soon afterwards. Gerard lent him a torch. "You don't want to step on a snake. Cassap wouldn't be at all pleased, so soon." In silence Fenton took the torch and with its beam making a dull yellow patch on the road before him he passed along the top of the ridge to the road which led townwards past his bungalow. From the branches over the road came a bird's shrill, insistent chirp. The sound of men singing could now be heard amidst the drumming. It rose and fell on the fitful, just perceptible breeze that was now beginning to stir through the darkness, as if somewhere in the heavens a shutter had been drawn back. The voices had a soaring, transcending note like the flight of a bird released, but then the drums would intensify and submerge them. Fenton fixed his eyes on the scattered lights which perforated the darkness where the town lay. Down there people lived, but had the distance been a million miles the division could not have been greater.

His feet sounded hollowly on the wooden steps as he went up to the door of the bungalow. On a table just inside was the extinguished lamp, but he did not light it and went straight to the bedroom. The mosquito-net hung over the bed, gauze-like, in loose folds which reflected the torch light. The torch also showed a chair at the end of the bed on which his pyjamas

were neatly folded. His slippers were on the uncarpeted floor beside the chair. The objects on the dressing-table were all widely spaced as if the boy had done his best with the few possessions to make a show.

## V.

THERE was one thing which Fenton, as he lay under the mosquito-net, could tell himself over and over again: he had no regrets. Even with a free choice unfettered by contractual obligations to his employers he would not have gone back. He had nothing to go back for. To come out here he had sacrificed no prospects, sundered no ties. He had walked out of the hostel to catch the boat-train without a single good-bye, save to the warden, who, a conscientious man, was relieved to see him go. "West Africa, eh? Well, I'm glad you're fixed up at last. Not a bad country nowadays, I believe. Let us know how you get on." The warden's conscience, evidently, had not been entirely clear. But then he was a man with preconceived notions about the colonies which were not easily changed. Or so Fenton had regarded him.

It was satisfactory that there was no one to whom he was expected to write, no one who was likely to have the least interest in his situation. He was by himself as completely as anyone had ever been. So at least he was spared the business of preparing carefully-phrased and reassuring letters. There was no one in England for whom he need put up any kind of show. He need expect no solicitous enquiries. He was unencumbered, completely free.

"Parentage Unknown." That was the very negative description of his antecedents as recorded on a card that followed him with the persistence of his own shadow as he was passed by a smooth and invisible process from one carefully graded educational establishment to the next. He had had a sight of



this card at the age of fourteen when sweeping the floor of the principal's study—it was one of those self-help schools. The filing-cabinet had been inadvertently left unlocked. He also read on the card that at the age of eight he had been regarded as 'backward'. A year or two later he had been described as 'inclined to be diffident, does not readily give his confidence'. Knowledge of these reports had merely given him satisfaction in knowing something he was not supposed to know. It raised him up. He became still more off-hand in his attitude to the staff, who in return intensified their efforts to, as it were, win him over. He was conscious of becoming a problem. Even less did he seek the companionship of the other boys. The principal grew worried, his institution had such a good name for turning parentless boys into useful, self-respecting members of society that the possibility of failure in any particular case was painful to contemplate. Yet he could not be sure that Fenton's attitude would not spread to the other boys. The matter was discussed for quite ten minutes by the educational sub-committee of the local authority at its monthly meeting. The card, no doubt, was laid on the table. The conclusion was that Philip Fenton, once thought to be backward, could benefit no further from the facilities which the institution offered. An opening was found as packer's assistant with a firm of wholesale booksellers in the City of London. At eighteen he was called up for national service and the artificially-lit basement with its wooden crates and piles of new books knew him no more.

Once more he passed under the ægis of an impersonal organisation which provided for all his material needs. He followed a rule of life and everything was given him. He had merely to submit. For many months the need for decision, for initiative on his own behalf, was suspended. The life was in

many ways irksome and uncongenial but he went through it much as one does a tedious railway journey. He was resigned to an inexorable process which could not be arrested. At times he envied his colleagues because they all looked forward so much to getting out. They all had something to get out for. He almost decided to make the Army his career. There are times when the approaching end of the journey comes as an unwelcome spur to effort. But before it was too late he rebelled. It came to him strongly that the design throughout his upbringing and military service had been that he should conform to type. Even while he was assisting in the packing of books someone from the institution to which he had lately belonged used to come and ask his employers as well as himself how he was fitting in. In the Army this process was intensified. The physical moulding by means of parades and vigorous bodily exercise was seasoned with lectures, often by men and women of intellectual prominence, on various aspects of citizenship in the modern state. He seemed to be in a continual process of manufacture.

He therefore accepted his discharge and then he spent some three years in various clerical jobs. They were of no significance in themselves except that one of them involved a certain degree of responsibility for the loading of lorries with consignments of boots and shoes. Mr. Cassap would have noted this, no doubt. Life during this period was not very satisfying. The young men around him had interests to keep them going, but he was a spectator, not their fellow-actor. He was on a bank watching the different craft on their passage downstream, but there was never a boat which he was disposed to join.

Then had come Mr. Cassap and West Africa. That was something! He had gone along on the merest chance. There

had been a remark overheard one morning at the next coffee-table. "West African Concessions—they're looking for someone, I believe." He had not stayed to hear more. A glance in the telephone book to establish the address and he had taken the first bus up the Strand. Never before had he acted so spontaneously. Even the look inside the principal's filing-cabinet had been preceded by several moments' hesitation. But there was something in the thought of being concerned in West African trade, even from the remote location of a London office which appeared to Fenton at the time as the most he could hope for, which caught at his imagination, for reasons so deep in his consciousness that he could not have explained them. *Parentage Unknown*. He had written the words defiantly, on the form of particulars which he had been required to complete in Mr. Cassap's office. Anxious for Fenton's services, Mr. Cassap had not been disposed to give the entry more than a passing glance. But the key might have been found there if the obscurity could have been lifted. Then, scarcely a month later, had come his first view of the coast of Guinea, a thick grey line on the horizon slowly turning green as the ship thrust steadily across the gap of sea towards it. Once they had passed close to a canoe whose square, dirty white sail billowed strongly from its bending pole. The black, high-foreheaded figure who steered with an oar over the stern raised an arm in greeting as his craft slid past on the swell; while in the cabin below glasses tinkled and the heavy leathered-upholstered chairs seemed all at once ponderous and outmoded.

The lift which that scene from the deck had given him was repeated his first morning in Nyankwa when at about half-past seven he stood on the top of the bungalow steps while preparations for breakfast went on behind him. The

sun had risen from behind the ancient residence once occupied by a District Commissioner, but the night's legacy of freshness had not yet been dispersed. The basin-like depression of the golf-course was spread before him and on the face of the opposite slope the white, red-roofed club-house was in sharp outline. Behind it on either side were trees partly screening different bungalows and to the right the line of the crest declined towards the forest. At this distance the white trunks of its forest trees were as slender as pencils against the olive-coloured background. Into this background Nyankwa's congestion of iron roofs and mud walls made an unsightly sprawl but the greater part of the town was hidden from Fenton's view by the line of scarlet-flowering flamboyants along the road which went down past the bungalow to the railway. At this hour the sky's early morning haze toned down the colours from their hot-house brilliance of the day before. There was no movement or sound. Every feature might have been deliberately put there as part of a picture to be gazed at. If this was indeed a place of ill-omen its appearances were singularly seductive. In all that green and fresh stillness evil could but seem very remote.

Most of that morning was spent in the company's yard. Gerard called for him at eight and they walked down together. He accepted Gerard's "Did you have a good night?" and the politely lifted eyebrows that went with it as no more than had to be quietly endured, but when Gerard followed this up by asking "Is that boy behaving himself?" he felt that the limits of legitimate solicitude had been reached.

"No attempts have yet been made upon me, if that's what you mean."

Again, despite himself, there was an edge to his voice in a remark which, if made with a laugh, would have been

innocuous, and the rest of the walk to the yard was done in silence.

On the company's siding was a line of twenty railway wagons. One by one the loaded lorries from the mine forty miles away were slowly negotiating the sharp downward turn from the road into the yard and forming up beside them. Immediately labourers boarded them and began to shovel the raw linxite—small chunks of clay-like, reddish substance—into the wagons. The labourers, Gerard explained, were not local, the Nyankwas being “lazy sods who sit on their bottoms all day doing damn all”. The labourers were in fact Dongas brought down from the northern provinces of the colony; tall, muscular, strong-chested men with a proud bearing. Some of them wore hats crumpled out of all recognition and soiled, loose-hanging singlets. Others were bare to the waist and their sweaty backs glistened as they bent and heaved with their spades. They shouted at each other from the lorries and sometimes would accompany each spadeful hurled into the wagons with a hoarse, triumphant yell. There was no shade in the yard. The sun, higher now, poured down its light relentlessly upon the green bush, the tawny laterite soil and the black skins.

“That’s the fetish grove,” said Gerard with a nod in front of him.

They stood at the end of the yard furthestmost from the station, their passage blocked by a dense screen of bushes and foliage which confronted them in the full hot glare of the sun.

“Down that path,” Gerard continued, with another nod towards a dark aperture some yards to the left, “and you come to the sacred shrine of the Nyankwas. The yard can’t be extended beyond this point.”

“You mean the people won’t agree?”

"My dear fellow! This is West Africa. The fetish lives down there, in a tree. Nothing can alter that. It's lived there ever since the first Nyankwas came up through a hole in the ground at that very spot. You might as well talk of shifting Westminster Abbey to make way for a car-park.\* And just for that we can't expand. We really want space for forty wagons and we can take only twenty. It's one of our chief bottlenecks."

Just where they stood the siding rejoined the main line, which went bending away on its embankment into the forest. Gerard indicated the trees on the other side of the line.

"Through those trees is the fetish village where the priests live. No one ever goes there. Not even the police. What goes on there God knows. People disappear, I believe. It's fantastic. The Government had the hell of a job thirty years ago to put the railway through here. It runs between the village and the fetish grove, you see. They had to pay thousands of pounds in compensation and even then there was a first-class riot."

Gerard turned to walk back, but Fenton lingered a moment to scan the trees across the iron-sleeper'd railway line. But they were an effective screen. He resumed his place by Gerard's side and they walked back along the yard. Before them stretched the parallel lines of wagons and lorries which swarmed with dark limbs and bare shoulders heaving and straining. The atmosphere was close.

"Yes," said Gerard, "the smell of Africa. I see you've noticed it. The one thing in which this country excels."

He stopped to shout peremptorily at a labourer on the nearest lorry who had temporarily relaxed. The man's broad nostrils quivered, in that momentary pause he held his head high, and his eyes were tense and glittering. Then suddenly

he bent forward, the leather charm which hung round his neck swung freely from his bare chest, and with a cry of energy he once more drove his spade into the linxite.

"You've got to keep 'em at it," said Gerard as he continued walking, "or you'll never get the wagons loaded in time."

They reached the station end of the yard and entered the company's office. This was a wooden, flimsy-looking structure and was in fact an ex-army hut brought up from Latuba in sections during the early days of the company's operations.

"The other room is the clerk's office," said Gerard as he opened the first door. "You'll meet Davis presently. One of the local intelligentsia. Quite a lad, or thinks he is."

The office was exceedingly small. The desk was hard up against the window which overlooked the yard and only a few inches separated the back of the chair from the partition which divided off the other office. The desk was littered with loose papers and dog-eared files were stacked along the various shelves.

"I hope you like making returns. It's your chief job here, though Davis ought to be able to do most of them. He's supposed to be educated."

There were returns of tonnage received and tonnage despatched. There were returns from Shorcliff of tonnage shipped. There were returns of petrol supplied to the lorries from the tanks behind the office and returns of days worked by each of the labourers.

"You send them all once a month to Fisher up at the mine," explained Gerard, "and he spends hours on them working out costs to God knows how many places of decimals. Then he draws graphs. Christ! Enough to paper the whole bloody hillside. And any economies he doesn't think of Cassap does for him."

For an hour Gerard explained the business of the office, lounging back in his chair, his dark hair falling loosely across his forehead, his khaki shirt unbuttoned and showing the singlet beneath. His manner was casual, he spoke in an off-hand way as if he did not really care whether Fenton absorbed what he said or not. As he threw the papers to one side there was the disdainful, downward turn of the lips, the barely perceptible shrug, the momentary pause as if his energies had to be summoned up before continuing. Always there appeared to be some overriding consideration at the back of his mind, and occasionally his eyes would rest on Fenton in silent appraisal.

Fenton did his best to conceal the restless fatigue which had come over him. He sat by Gerard's side on a stool that was too low, with his bare white knees pressed against the drawers of the desk. Through the open door a patch of sunlight fell across the floor where he was sitting. His gaze kept straying from the papers on the desk to the labourers outside as they worked at their endless task. Gerard's words came to him through a miasma of confused thoughts.

"With linxite alone we could double the colony's exports. We could bring millions of pounds into this country if we really got going. But we need new machinery, better rail facilities, a long lease. And the local Government can't decide. They can't make up their bureaucratic little minds whether to encourage us or not. I suppose they think if we fail they'll look foolish. So they compel us to go on at a sort of half-cock. And they won't help us to get priorities in new equipment. So every ton has to be dug out by hand, loaded, unloaded and loaded again by hand, as you can see. The whole situation is absurd."

Gerard tilted back his chair and lit a cigarette while the



lorries, once emptied, came down the yard towards the office and, with high-revving engines, lumbered slowly with a sharp right-hand turn up the yard's exit to the road, where they set off on the return journey to the mine.

"You'd better meet Davis. He's a typical specimen. Runs the local bolshy club and wants to go to England to complete his education, so-called. Davis!" he shouted, lifting up his head. "Davis!"

Fenton turned as the door from the other office opened. The clerk entered.

He was a young man in the early twenties, not very tall but of substantial build. His dark face had a smooth, prosperous-looking plumpness. As he smiled—a beaming, intense smile which he directed at Fenton almost immediately—there were two firm lines between his broad nostrils and the corners of his mouth. The smile stretched his lips back across his polished white teeth. The pin-points of light in his dark eyes gave them a rich glisten. He wore no coat. The bow-tie of white-spotted blue might have been deemed showy, but he could carry it. It went with his cuff-links and his cream-coloured trousers which, fresh from the laundryman's table, hung immaculate without a flaw. His short black hair had a mossy curliness and held in place a yellow pencil which jutted out over his forehead. A parting perfectly straight divided his hair neatly up the centre. The sun through the door gave the pigment of his face the shine of brown varnish. Davis positively gleamed, from the patches of light on his forehead and cheeks to the polished toe-caps of his brown leather shoes. He had the nap and shine of this year's model straight from the factory and newly unpacked.

Fenton stared. The clerk's eyes, with a whitish roll, moved to Gerard.

"Yes, sir?"

"This is Mr. Fenton. He'll be in charge here."

Readily Davis extended his hand.

"Oh! You are welcome, sir."

Fenton's stool scraped on the floor as he rose to take the hand. The short, business-like rejoinder which Gerard, no doubt, would have had no difficulty in framing, eluded him. But his smile was spontaneous and he gripped the hand hard.

"What about that petrol indent?" Gerard asked.

The contact was broken. Their hands separated.

"Yes, sir," David replied, shifting his gaze. "I am now on it. It will be all right, sir."

His tone managed to convey that he ought not to be suspected of falling down on such a matter as that. But he took Gerard's words as a dismissal and with another smile at Fenton went back into his office.

"Not a bad clerk," Gerard conceded, "but you can't trust any of them when it comes to the point. Especially him. He's a nephew of the Krontihene, the chief's principal elder. He's a chap to be watched."

"What harm can he do?"

"Harm? Well, he won't set fire to the petrol tanks or blow up the railway line, if that's what you think. You don't have to fear any violence. But his uncle's the real power in this town and he's going to be pretty well informed about everything that goes on in this office, that's all. Might not amount to much. Depends how things develop." Gerard looked down at his desk for a moment before saying with abrupt decisiveness, "Let's go for a drive round the town and I'll show you the sights. We'll take one of the lorries."

## VI

AT half-past four Arthur Wellington Davis—he had assumed the name just before going to Latuba College as being more in accord with his new cultural status—lifted his jacket off its hanger on the office door and put it on carefully. With his white sun-helmet settled at a slight angle he stepped outside and set off along the railway line towards the station, his quickest way to the town. Behind him the twenty wagons loaded with linxite stood waiting for the midnight train which was to take them to the coast. Four hundred tons of linxite a day, month after month, for building new houses in Britain. This ruthless stripping of the country's mineral resources by foreign capitalists was a matter which figured prominently in the monthly debates of the Nyankwa Progressive Youth Association which Davis had founded after coming back to Nyankwa twelve years ago. He was proud of that achievement, as having brought a new interest into the life of the local literate community.

A minute or two's walking brought him to where the trees screening the fetish village ceased, and leaving the line he pursued his way among the cocoa sheds which faced the station platform. The sweetish yet slightly astringent smell which came from cocoa stored in bags reached him. Nearly six hundred loads had been produced by his uncle's farms that season. He knew because he helped his uncle with the accounts. Sixty shillings a load. Nearly eighteen hundred pounds. Enough, Davis was never tired of thinking, to maintain him in England for four or five years. And that amount

did not include the rents from his uncle's several houses in Kurakessie.

His way also led past the back of Johnson and Holloway's timber yard, where long lines of sawn timber stood against special racks for seasoning before being railed to Latuba for export. Timber was another of his uncle's interests, though a recent one. It was a matter in which Davis's clerical assistance was never invited. A good many rumours surrounded his uncle's interest in timber. The Greek trader, Mr. Asbestos, the payment of the stool debts, the election of a new chief, were all threads in a very tangled skein. The Krontihene, after holding aloof from Nyankwa affairs for many years, was believed, with Mr. Asbestos, to have put up a large sum of money for the liquidation of the debts left twelve years ago by the old chief, which had hung like a millstone round the state of Nyankwa ever since. Davis used to wonder whether this was the money which would otherwise have sent him to an English university.

He began to cross the football field which lay between the back of the timber yard and the town. Some schoolboys were playing there. "*Krachi* Davis! *Krachi* Davis!" they called shrilly. *Krachi* meant clerk. That's what he was. The clerk Davis. And that was what he would remain unless his uncle kept his promise of many years ago to send him to England, or unless the Nyankwa Progressive Youth Association and its many sister societies throughout the country got their way and all young men like himself were given Government scholarships to Britain.

He walked up the High Street. The business of the day was done and, while the women were out of sight in the compounds behind the houses cooking the evening meal, the men sat or lounged by the roadside, in shirt-sleeves or with

their clothes dropped loosely to their waists. They called out to him in their own peculiar English as he passed.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Davis. Your new boss come? He please for you? He give you increment?"

"Mr. Davis, how are you? Your uncle he well? Small time now he go send you for Englan'? He go make you fine lawyer?"

Shouts of laughter accompanied these remarks. At one time Davis had taken them as compliments. The good-humoured ridicule was a cloak to their envy. He was the nephew of the richest and most influential man in Nyankwa and one day he was going to England to be trained as a lawyer, like so many others of his ex-collegians at Latuba. But, as in the case of the schoolboys, there was now beginning to be a bitter taunt in the words. He had held himself out as a potential 'big master', he had boasted for nothing, if he didn't go soon he would be classed as a bluffer and totally discredited.

Davis lived in his uncle's house, which stood in a narrow alleyway off Cow Lane, near the chief's palace. It consisted of four single-storeyed blocks of six rooms each, built round an inner yard or compound. An overhanging roof of iron sheets, held down in places by large stones, was supported by vertical timbers, and a cement *stoep* about two feet high and four feet broad encircled the compound. The cement facing of the walls was cracked and patchy. The rooms were dark and ill-ventilated, goats and poultry had as free a run of the place as the occupants, and all over the open-air compound cooking-pots and pieces of cloth laid out to dry made an untidy litter. In this establishment were the Krontihene and his three wives, half a dozen of his attendants, his two elderly sisters, his three grown-up sons and their wives and a dozen or more youths, children and infants.

The compound was the scene of much activity. Children were washed, babies were fed, women stood pounding with long heavy sticks into wooden pots for the next meal, chickens ran clucking into corners, the young men sat in pairs on the *stoep* playing draughts, slamming down the pieces with defiant raps. Above all rose the incessant, high-pitched chatter of the women ranging from market prices to the doings of the fetish and the cruder kinds of gossip. The Krontihene always excepted, no one had any secrets from anyone. They lived in too close contact. They discussed each other's lives freely, down to the most intimate details. Scandal was not whispered, it was shouted; shouted in the compound, across the street, in the market, and magnified at every turn.

There was one inmate of the household who was technically a stranger, though he had lived there since birth: Tinga, the cripple. His body was stunted, his legs were under-developed and partly paralysed, and his arms were not much better. He spent most of the day begging in the streets and got about with quite remarkable agility by crawling on all fours in a kind of tunnelling movement. Rubber pads cut from old tyres were tied to his knees and elbows, these being his points of contact with the ground, and he went forward with his head down, his back slanting up, and his short spindly legs held off the ground and waving behind him as useless appendages. When he reached his destination he tucked his legs under him out of sight and squatted upright, looking as if he were buried in the ground from the waist down.

He was not related to the Krontihene and was not even a native of Nyankwa. His mother when a child had entered the household as a slave, having been captured from her village in the north during one of the tribal wars which were frequent in those days. Later she had had this hopelessly deformed

child, but it had not been cast out. In an African community physical abnormality often arouses awe and so it was in this case. Tinga's existence was tolerated and when his mother died he continued to receive food and shelter, of a kind. Yow Boma, the present Krontihene, had inherited him with the rest of the property. He became a sort of household mascot and as he squatted on the ground in a round cotton cap, his nether limbs tucked out of sight, he looked the part. No one deemed it inconsistent with his status—he was a slave, after all—for him to go tunnelling his way among people's legs, begging. His favourite pitch was outside the court where the Assistant District Commissioner from Adantakrom sat fortnightly to hear cases. Litigants used to throw him alms for their own good luck. His Buddha-like posture certainly suggested that he might have an influence, but his expression was one of amused cockiness, the impudent retort never very far away. His features were sharper than those of the local people, suggestive of more northern climes. He occupied no room in the Krontihene's house, but sheltered on the *stoep* under the roof's overhang, just outside Yow Boma's apartments.

For many years after the old chief died Yow Boma did not live in Nyankwa, preferring one of his fine three-storeyed houses in the provincial headquarters town of Kurakessie. Deputations of elders from each rival faction in turn used to call on him, with presents they could ill afford, to ask for a loan to help Nyankwa out of its difficulties. But the same representatives never went twice. The Krontihene had too strong a tongue. Successive District Commissioners charged with Nyankwa affairs also visited him from time to time. "You're the only man who can settle this trouble, Krontihene. Why don't you step in? The town's going to ruin." But

although he smiled and offered his visitors cigarettes and glasses of beer, the hard stare in his deep-set eyes remained. "I know my people," he would say in his rather harsh voice. "The Nyankwas are not good. If you give them money today they will come and ask for more tomorrow." And one District Commissioner after another would give a resigned shrug and go and write in his quarterly report that the Krontihene of Nyankwa still resided in Kurakessie and failed to realise where his higher duty lay; or words to that effect.

But Yow Boma kept his ear close to the ground and the opening of the Sobosso mine did not escape him. He sent a message to his nephew Davis, who had left school a year or two earlier and was earning his living as a clerk with one of the shipping companies in Latuba. "The white men are opening a new office in Nyankwa. They will want clerks. It is good if you make an application."

Davis had been taken on. Africanwise it was rumoured in the town that Hobden, who made the selection, had received a large present for preferring the Krontihene's nephew to other applicants. But Davis was outstanding and clerks of his calibre were difficult to find in Nyankwa, especially at a time when trade had stagnated in that locality for years. Anyway, Davis came. He left Latuba with reluctance. He had been at school there for five years and worked there for two and he had no desire now to go off and bury himself in the bush. It was like being transported back into the dark ages of squalor and superstition. He was educated. He had the matriculation. Latuba College and not the bush village of his childhood was now his true background. With its laboratories and lecture-halls and library it stood for the twentieth century in West Africa. The college was built on a hill overlooking the sea and distant horizons. The clock-tower and square, solid blocks



of buildings in white stone with their row upon row of windows, could be seen for miles around. There were no close barriers of forest. In Latuba College one could see. One looked over the town, the harbour, the shipping and the open plains which reached inland and along the coast. The classrooms and dormitories were airy. Excursions to the railway workshops, electric power station, water-works and airport were frequently arranged. English newspapers and periodicals were unstinted. A boy at Latuba did not glimpse the heights, he was constantly having his head held up to gaze at them. Davis had gazed at them and he still did so in his imagination in the forest fastness of Nyankwa. For Latuba was the place where the outside world and West Africa touched. Get on one of those ships—that was all you had to do—just get on one of those ships, and you had broken free, into the promised land. You returned with an exalted status, like a Mohammedan pilgrim back from Mecca. If the streets of London were not paved with gold, they were papered with diplomas and certificates of scarcely less value.

It seemed long ago that, during a visit to Kurakessie in one of the school holidays, his uncle had introduced him to a District Commissioner who had called on the usual mission. "This is my nephew, sir. One day I shall send him to England to complete his education. It is better to do that than spend money on those useless people in Nyankwa. They toil not neither do they spin, and God will look after them as He will."

But it so happened that Yow Boma did apparently spend money in this way. He had started visiting Nyankwa and seeing Mr. Asbestos. The stool debts were paid. He had even come to live in Nyankwa, and three months later James Buachi Andrews, whom few people could remember, was

electd chief. Once or twice Davis had sought to ascertain the Krontihene's intentions. But the answers were not encouraging to a young man who was nearly twenty-five. Times were hard; next year, perhaps, the Government would raise the price of cocoa or, as now, "It is good for you to work in the white man's office a little longer. Otherwise they might get some stranger to take your place, from Adantakrom or perhaps Sobosso. And that would not be good." In other words, keep it in the family. The Krontihene liked to know what was going on. Was it true that there was going to be a railway line from Sobosso to Nyankwa? How much was now being paid to the Sobosso chief in royalties from the mine? And Hobden! What had happened there?

What indeed had happened there? It was still a frequent topic of conversation in Nyankwa's compounds. Davis, having worked in the same office, was expected to know something. He had even been called upon for evidence in the coroner's court. Had the deceased seemed quite normal? He had seemed perfectly normal, snapping at the labourers for leaving their shovels about and snapping at the office messenger for not sharpening his pencils right up to the last. If anything his touchiness had become a little more noticeable, but the coroner quickly ascertained from the Mines Manager that he had done a long tour. The official verdict was not accepted by the public in town, partly because it was official and anything official was *ipso facto* suspect, and also because after the case Nunoo the steward-boy began to spend money with noticeable freedom. The conclusion to anyone of sense was obvious. Hobden had discovered Nunoo stealing and Nunoo had killed him. As simple as that. It was true that Nunoo had been able to establish an alibi—he had been with friends in the town. But Nyankwa was not convinced. Alibis could be

arranged. There was also the medical evidence on which the coroner had so much relied. But no one in the town set much store by that either.

On the whole of this matter of Hobden, Davis found himself being closely questioned by his uncle, whose extreme interest in anything concerning the Sobosso Mining Company lacked all visible reason. But a change had come over the Krontihene in the last three months, as if the shadow of the forest around Nyankwa had fallen between him and the common concerns of men. He seemed to be engrossed in an affair greater than himself. His rents and his cocoa farms were no longer primary considerations. He said little and the deep, open-hearted laugh which used to ring out in the big house in Kurakessie was heard seldom in Nyankwa. Instead there was a grave, preoccupied Krontihene playing his part in an age-old system of chieftaincy. He spent much of his time in consultation with the other elders at the palace and when he returned he would go flapping in his sandals through the compound looking at no one, the lines in his face graven deep with contemplation.

Then there were the visits of Komfo Kabachi, the chief fetish priest. A shrunken little man with a skull as fragile-looking as an eggshell, he would come long after it was dark from the village in the trees, when the streets were quiet. A small boy, one of the fetish's servers, accompanied him. The Krontihene himself let him in. All round the compound would be locked doors and shuttered windows, but if Davis were awake he would click back the bolt of his shutter when he heard footsteps and watch the three figures go hurrying across the compound. The Krontihene and the fetish priest would retire to one of the rooms while the small boy slept wrapped in his cloth on the *stoep* just outside the door.

On the days following these nocturnal visits Davis would watch his uncle closely, but the hard face was inscrutable. State secrets were safe with the Krontihene. He was the intermediary between the state council and the fetish priests, without whose agreement and support nothing could be done. They were the earthly representatives of the spirit world and of countless ancestors. No action could be judged without reference to those who had gone before. Unless they approved or could be placated the crops would fail and the women would be barren. So the fetish priests kept to their village with their families and attendants, safe from contamination by the profane, and ventured out only to cross the railway line into the fetish grove on sacrificial occasions. When Komfo Kabachi visited the Krontihene he did so at an hour when no one was about and only after he had washed himself with certain pungent herbs as a preservative.

Davis was not surprised when, late in the evening of the day of Fenton's first appearance in the office, he was summoned to the Krontihene's presence to give an account of the new arrival. The room was lit dimly by a small paraffin lamp burning on a table. It showed Yow Boma leaning back in a corner of the divan. His tall figure was loosely wrapped in a dark cloth of ample folds. He sat in an attitude of easy indulgence. His legs were crossed, a sandal embroidered with a little gold star dangled from the suspended foot, a half-empty glass of beer was beside him and one arm rested along the back of the divan, a cigarette between the fingers.

The low oblong room was comfortably furnished. There were carpets on the floor, heavily cushioned arm-chairs, little tables in corners with cigarette-boxes, paper-knives, ivory carvings and one or two framed photographs. One of these was of Davis taken at Latuba College. The Krontihene had

once been wont to point to it with pride, but deferred promises had since given it a somewhat ironic appearance. For Nyankwa the room was sumptuous. It was a room which, apart from the low ceiling and undistempered walls, was comparable with the better residences at Latuba which the more successful of the old collegians had acquired for themselves. But one could not alter the character or atmosphere of a room by covering the floor and putting in a few well-polished tables and chairs. The nightly visits of Komfo Kabachi, the traditional costume of the Krontihene himself, the occasional appearance through a curtained door of an attendant in the person of a small, barefooted boy in native cloth, all these were sufficient to dispel any illusion that a different way of life had prevailed. It was the sort of room where it seemed improper to wear a European suit. Davis never entered it without feeling that he was crossing back into a world which no longer ought to be his. But it was his. He had been born into it, the ages of time which lay behind it and of which he himself was a fruition gave an enduring massiveness, a faith in itself, to which the few years he had spent in Latuba College could offer but the puniest challenge. If you were away from it, the influence might be forgotten. But if you were in the midst of it, as in this inner temple of the Krontihene's room, the great power asserted itself and became intensely real. Davis was aware of a kinship—it gave him a shudder—with all those things for which the impassive figure of the Krontihene stood. There was a throw-back to forest clearings lit by fires, mystic rites, dark human forms slipping through the trees. The kinship was one which, if challenged, he would have renounced indignantly. But against the weight of centuries words altered nothing. The past had a hand on his shoulder, the other hand was beckoning, and deep in his

mind was the tremor of a response. And this was what gave him the greatest fear of all—that if he didn't break away soon he would be engulfed, and that there was a small part of him which would submit with a sneaking kind of relish.

The Krontihene indicated a chair and he sat down.

"The white man who has arrived from England—he came to your office today?"

"Yes, I have seen him."

Davis waited. He was not going to volunteer information. A string of questions about Fenton was about to follow and he viewed the prospect with distaste. To satisfy this curiosity would be to descend into an association with the Krontihene from a higher level where he could have kept his hands clean. It would amount to the admission of common ground between them. Yet the fulfilment of his ambitions depended too much on his uncle's goodwill to refuse answers to such questions as were put.

"Is he a young man?"

"Yes. Much younger than Gerard."

"So?"

The Krontihene did not alter his easy posture and expression was not clear in the murky light. But his quickened interest was in the air.

"Has he been in this country before?"

From outside in the compound came the sound of splashing as some member of the household washed himself in the privacy of darkness. Davis considered his uncle's last question. He remembered Fenton's smile. It had shone out at him with an openness, a complete absence of reservation, which had gone to his heart. The candid eyes and the grip of the hand had lifted him up. The thought now of that brief con-

tact raised him above the immediate environment of the Krontihene's household where fetish priests came by night and people washed themselves out of buckets in the dark. It was in his mind, for the merest instant, to walk out of his uncle's house in reckless abandon. But to advance in life one had to be in alliance with one side or the other. He had the instincts of his race against the dangerous uncertainties of isolation. And what could Fenton do for him after all? Just how lasting was the quality of sincerity, of acting from the heart, which for those few moments had been exhibited? He had seen something of the same quality in European masters newly appointed to the staff at Latuba College. But generally it was gone after a few months and the smiles then became formal and strained, artificial.

"No," he replied, "I don't think he has been in this country before."

"And the other one—Gerard—when will he return to Sobosso?"

"In a few days."

"Gerard gives him advice, I suppose?"

It was on his tongue to say that he did not listen to their conversation, but the moment of audacity had passed. All he replied was, "Perhaps," but the Krontihene, restlessly adjusting the folds of his toga-like garment which lay over one shoulder, made a sharp clicking sound in his mouth which spurred Davis into adding, to forestall a more forcible expression of his uncle's impatience:

"I don't think they agree together."

He told himself that this was no betrayal of confidence. Two such dissimilar types could not possibly agree, and the Krontihene was sure to hear of it in a dozen different ways.

"Have they quarrelled?" Yow Boma had leaned forward a little.

"I haven't heard them quarrelling. But they just don't agree on things."

"Gerard is still thinking of his friend Hobden," was the Krontihene's analysis. "One does not like to see a stranger in one's friend's shoes. . . . How does the young man behave? Has he got a good mind towards us?"

"His white friends have not yet spoiled him."

He permitted himself that piece of cynicism. It was well in line with his position as secretary of the Nyankwa Progressive Youth Association, whose monthly debates and resolutions had a strong nationalist flavour. Not until he had spoken the words did he realise how, with their implication of hostility to the inhabitants of the ridge, they ranged him on the Krontihene's side.

From Yow Boma's mouth there sounded another click, this time of satisfaction. For a while he was silent. In the yellowish semi-darkness Davis felt himself being observed. He had the sense that the previous questions had been mere preparation. The main point was coming now. He searched for an excuse to withdraw and his eyes fell on the lamp. The crescent-shaped flame had lengthened and narrowed to a tall, smoking point and quickly he got up and moved forward to adjust the wick.

He turned to face the Krontihene.

"I should like to take leave."

"You had better sit down again. I have a small matter to discuss with you. We have to make some good arrangement about the watchman."

Reluctantly Davis returned to his chair. The room was even darker after the lowering of the wick and he had the illusion



that all the darkness was emanating from the wrapped figure of the Krontihene, whose presence had acquired something more than the merely physical.

"The night-watchman at your yard," continued Yow Boma, "is troubling us too much. He is a Donga man and does not understand our customs. Whenever he sees the fetish priests crossing the railway to go into the grove he shouts at them as if they were thieves. The other night a policeman heard him shouting and came to make an investigation. He wanted to take them to the police station. He comes from Adantakrom. These strangers are a nuisance. However, the fetish priest gave him a present and he went away. But it is not good at all. Komfo Kabachi has complained."

The Krontihene paused. Davis remained silent. This was what he had come to—midnight discussions about fetish priests. From the compound he heard the rattle of a bucket being overturned as whoever it was finished his ablutions.

"I have discovered," the Krontihene resumed, "that the Donga man is an old man who wants to go home to die in his own country. In a few days he will tell the young man from England that he wants to resign from the business. The young man will want another watchman. Kwesi Amma will apply. The young man will ask your advice. You will advise him to take Kwesi Amma. The young man will be very pleased to get another watchman so easily."

Davis did not speak at once. He was wondering how much money his uncle had had to pay the Donga man to persuade him to leave. The Dongas did not readily accept bribes, least of all from the Nyankwas, whom they despised. The price must have been high and the offer skilfully contrived.

"Do you understand?" asked the Krontihene.

Still Davis did not speak. Apart from his distaste tonight

for discussing Fenton he had never had any scruples about giving the Krontihene information. That was mere talk, and everybody talked. Mr. Kufuor and Mr. Essuman of the Amalgamated African Trading Corporation were always talking about their firm's business. Even Mr. Brobby, bank cashier and President of the Progressive Youth Association, did not need over-much encouragement to enlarge on the subject of clients' accounts. But when it came to doing something—that was different. It was a definite committal. Fenton would consult him about another watchman. Normally he would have said, "Yes, sir. It is quite easy, sir. We will consult the Donga headman." By that means someone reliable, another Donga man, would be obtained. Instead the Krontihene wanted to put in old Kwesi Amma, one of his hangers-on, whom everybody laughed at for being soft in the head.

"The white men do not like Nyankwas," Davis protested. "They say they are all thieves. For watchmen they will only take Dongas."

"You worry too much. The young man who has just come does not know the difference. Of course, we will do nothing until Gerard has gone. Then it will be easy."

Again Davis was silent. The lamp was beginning to smoke once more and the fume-charged atmosphere was heavy on him.

"You just tell the white man you know a good watchman," added the Krontihene reassuringly, "and then you bring Kwesi Amma. And there will be no more trouble at the yard."

Davis abandoned as hopeless any attempt to explain his feelings. There was no community of ideas between his uncle and himself on which it could be based. The idea of being used against Fenton in this way was repellent. But imponderable forces were at work. They reached out from the village

in the trees, relentless and unmindful of whom they brought within their grasp, recognising no other power as valid. Resistance could only make one an outcast. One was universally disowned. In the old days the sanction was expulsion to the forest, where death was certain. Present methods were less crude. In order to live in bare peace with one's neighbours one banished oneself to Latuba or some other cosmopolitan centre where one lived among strangers, unknown and forgotten. Davis had been pleased to live in Latuba once, but then he had felt his uncle behind him. Otherwise life there in daily view of the sea could only be an endless and tantalising torment.

"Suppose I ask Mr. Fenton to instruct the Donga man not to interfere with the priests?" he suggested.

"How do you know the Donga man would keep the instructions? These Dongas like other people's affairs better than their own. It would not be safe."

Safe? The night-watchman was interfering rather trivially with the fetish priests and the Krontihene spoke of making things 'safe'. Davis felt he was on the fringe of some big matter. To be admitted even thus far showed how the Krontihene assumed his loyalty. Was anything being planned? Anything that required the absence from the proximity of the fetish grove of someone like the Donga man who was addicted to calling in policemen when circumstances were suspicious?

"Is anything coming on?" he asked boldly.

"We wish to restore Nyankwa to its former proud position," said Yow Boma from the shadows, with all the blandness of an experienced politician. "I have promised my good friend the District Commissioner in Adantakrom my assistance. But our customs do not always make progress easy. You are a Nyankwa man. You know our fetish priests. We have to

make their mouths sweet before they agree to new things. You have been to school. You will want to see Nyankwa go forward. Your help in this small matter will be very useful. There will soon be much money in Nyankwa and I will then send you to England as I promised."

It all had a plausible ring. If there were going to be large developments in Nyankwa—a railway to Sobosso, for example, to bring in more linxite (which might mean another slice of the fetish grove, for which the spirits would have to be pacified)—there would be another increase in commercial activity and no one had a better eye for rising property values than Yow Boma. For compulsory acquisition of land, such as for a railway, the Government paid well.

In any case there was no more to be said just now. Taking his nephew's consent for granted the Krontihene indicated that the interview was closed and Davis, feeling that he had shown but a weak resistance, went out into the compound. He stood a moment in the night air and shivered a little. The Krontihene's room with its closed shutters had no fresh air. On the hill at Latuba the windows were always open. The sea-breeze blew continually through the rooms. But there was no breeze here, or at best only a feeble breath which soon passed and could scarcely penetrate the honeycombed congestion of the town. People lived day after day in the same foul air until the rains came, when there were violent storms, convulsions of nature, which smote at the town and sought to carry it away in a frenzy of purgation.

Beneath an untarnished moon the walls surrounding the rectangular compound were suffused with a pale, all-effacing greyness. But for Davis there were still the long spreading cracks, the broken corners, the discoloured patches, and across the surface of the compound he could see the dark stain where

the bucket had been emptied. Revulsion came over him. It's all rotten, he thought, rotten, rotten. But the Krontihene had renewed his promise to send him to England. The prospect was like a beacon before him. In another six or possibly twelve months he would have left for ever all this primitive squalor and fetishism.

## VII

THE few members gathered in the club at noon on Fenton's second day in Nyankwa had already heard about the episode when he entered with Gerard. The sensation caused seemed disproportionate. But never before, apparently, had anyone gone into the Guinéa Bank, stretched out a hand to Dave Mackinnon's black bulldog sitting stolidly on the counter, patted it, and been received with nothing more dangerous than an amiable growl. Fenton had done this, almost unthinkingly. He had had his hand on the Lion's neck before Gerard could warn him and even before Dave Mackinnon, who was at the other end of the counter, but who had a sixth sense whenever the Lion was concerned, could cry out, "Don't touch that dog!" The African clerks, after sharply exclaiming, had burst into peals of head-shaking laughter. Muttering beneath his moustache, glowering as if an indecent liberty had been taken with his dearest possession, his face even redder than usual, the bank manager, short and fat, had come bustling along behind the counter. "Ye might have lost your hand, man!"

"I don't think so. Our regimental mascot was a bulldog. I had to feed it."

That, of course, went all round the club also, but the laughter was against Dave Mackinnon as much as Fenton. For the effects on himself Fenton did not much care. He saw himself already in the eyes of the others as a touchy, odd sort of individual who for some inconceivable reason, in defiance of Gerard's plain warning, had taken on Hobden's boy. In

face of Mackinnon's ruffled and peremptory manner the only alternative would have been some kind of apology, but the stage of any inclination to apologise for himself was past. He had cut loose from all that.

At the club that morning he found himself the centre of a respectful interest. Stanley Bull and the half-dozen other members in khaki shorts and open-necked shirts who stood against the bar did not yet accept him as one of themselves. They still had to be careful with him. They were still guarded as if they couldn't yet make him out. But they offered him drinks. They recognised that he had brought something off. Williams once or twice tried to turn the conversation, but he could not succeed against a new topic such as this.

"So you've tamed the Lion, eh? Jolly good show. . . . Dave locks him in the strong-room when he goes out, you know. Got his little box in there and everything. . . . He squats on the counter to scare away customers. No one goes to the bank unless he really needs money. . . . No one else dare touch the brute."

"Aye," said Dave Mackinnon heavily. "It comes to us all. Old age. The Lion's lost his spirit. He's growing old."

"Nonsense, Dave," said Stanley Bull. "He'll survive you many years. Have a drink."

"Aye," repeated the bank manager in a long sigh. "Getting old! Regimental mascot indeed! The Lion's worth twenty of 'em. . . . You wouldn't take him when I go on leave?" he said to Fenton with sudden hopefulness.

"I've no strong-room."

There was a laugh.

"Anyway you would lose your steward-boy, wouldn't you?" Williams put in quietly in the pause which followed.

One couldn't say that of itself it wasn't a perfectly normal

and natural remark to make. But in the careful way in which it was dropped into the silence, in the tone which suggested that the loss of Nunoo was something Fenton but needed an excuse for, in the smug smile with which it was accompanied, there was deliberate provocation. Williams held his pipe-stem an inch or two from his mouth and his eyes looked up at Fenton in a way that was almost insolent.

Fenton gripped himself. He continued to meet Williams's eyes but he was saying nothing. Again he felt himself to be under general scrutiny. There was the same waiting for his words. Cordiality was suspended.

"It's no affair of mine," Williams went on, "but if you did want to get rid of him at any time, taking the Lion would be the surest method. All the Africans funk him like the devil." He stuck the pipe between his teeth with a little snap and his slightly mocking eyes beneath the raised eyebrows still did not move.

Fenton hated him. He could see contempt in the smug face and a superior, self-satisfied awareness of the ways of the world. Williams wouldn't have been tricked by Mr. Cassap, Williams wouldn't have tried to bluff things out by taking on a suspect steward-boy and by a steadfast refusal to ask for details. He would have despised such heroics and he despised them now in Fenton, who wanted to smash his fist against the thin black moustache above the pipe-stem.

"That's right, old boy, that's right," exclaimed Stanley Bull hurriedly. "Don't take the Lion if you want a happy home. Not even for an overdraft, eh?"

Fenton turned to the counter and emptied his glass.

"I'd better be getting along," he said. "Cheerio!"

He gave them all except Williams a hurried glance, there were a few grins in return, he picked up his hat and went out



of the club. He was sweating and as he walked up the road he wiped his face and neck and the backs of his hands. One of these days he would hit Williams. It was fore-ordained. He knew it. The man was out to provoke him to the limit.

To avoid meeting him again he stayed away from the club for several days. In the evenings until the sun went down he worked in his garden. Evidently Hobden had not taken much interest in it, but Fenton was pleased for once in his life to have a place of his own to look after, and it pleased him to be out watching the sunset when the whole area of the ridge and its slopes were shown with a soft golden lustre. When the light had gone he went into the bungalow, changed, and walked restlessly up and down the ill-furnished sitting-room. His single-pressure lamp did not entirely dispel the shadows at each end. Through the jalousies which went the whole length of the bungalow and which were propped open at their widest like mouths gasping for air he could see the light of the club-house opposite. There was an intense quietness.

Since his arrival the furniture had been arranged, not in accordance with any suggestion made by himself, but by Nunoo to follow, no doubt, the pattern of the previous occupier. The brown wooden settee was against the wall which divided off the bedroom. Two arm-chairs, upholstered with khaki canvas-covered cushions found piled on top of the wardrobe, occupied the corners at one end. They faced each other at half right-angles and there was a small round coffee-table between them. They might have been awaiting visitors, with little hope of being gratified. Against the outer wall was a desk, with the majesty of the African night before it to inspire any letters that might be written. Only Fenton hadn't

any letters to write, and the dark empty shelves of the book-case confronted him from the other end of the room, echoing his isolation. When Gerard had gone, he thought, he would go into town and look for some carpets, cushions and curtains to relieve this heavy monotone of brownness in which it seemed as if his evenings would have to be spent. But he did not believe that a few bright colours could be more than blatantly superficial. The sound of voices and rattle of glasses might do more to dispel the atmosphere. That meant parties. In effect he would have to bring the club over here. But there was little reason to suppose that the members would be glad to forsake the other side of the golf-course for their refreshments, even for an evening. For them the bungalow still had its associations. A party here now, so soon, would need a good deal of carrying through. There would be too strong a sense in everybody's mind of what had gone before. And then, while his guests were seating themselves, in would come the boy with a tray of drinks, the same boy who was suspected. It couldn't be done. Such a party on the scene of recent tragedy could only be regarded as in questionable taste. He could guess the comments when the free air of the club-house had been regained. "Didn't seem right somehow. . . . Not like the old times. . . . Set me off wondering again what was behind it. . . . And that confounded boy. . . ."

Fenton, as he stood by the windows watching the steadily burning light over at the club, felt that if he had got himself accepted as one of themselves, if on those first two appearances he had gone over well, the awkwardness they would feel in entering this house might have been overcome. A lively uninhibited manner on his part could have carried it off. But instead of being one of them he was the object of their curiosity. He had that in him which set him apart. It was

being conscious of his unknown origin, it was resentment at being tricked by Cassap, it was the peculiarity of his position as the occupier of this house, it was a combination of all these things. "Queer chap, young Fenton. Keeps to himself, doesn't he? He'll go the same way if he's not careful."

For a start, of course, he could sack Nunoo. Make a clean sweep. He could have faced this the more readily, together with all the trouble of finding a replacement, if Nunoo had not been such an excellent servant. He ran the house with well-drilled regularity, the routine of years not changing with the change of occupier. Fenton did not have to tell him what to do. Nunoo knew the whole business of looking after him. He had had a few weeks' holiday and he now went on as before. Fenton's sense that he was taking up a part which someone else had laid down was brought home to him when, on coming in from his first evening's work in the garden, he found his bedroom slippers placed by one of the chairs. They were on the uncarpeted boards, waiting. The sight gave him a shock. But he found himself sitting down and taking off his shoes in order to comply. And he never altered the arrangement.

Nunoo never gave any sign of guilty knowledge, but his face was not one which could be easily read. It was an older face than Davis's, very dark, lacking polish, and having a set expression which never varied and which it was impossible to get behind. It was not a sulky expression. It was completely yet firmly negative. The small eyes looked out as if through holes in a mask. He was short and spare and his white uniform jacket fitted him with the exactness of a military tunic. He did his work in a deft and business-like manner. There was nothing to show whether he held Fenton in greater or less esteem than his late employer. He could not be turned

out merely for the suspicions of people like Williams and Gerard, suspicions which might be no more than wishful thinking. Suicide was not a pleasant verdict. It was a conclusion which friends resisted if they could by naming other possible causes. A poker-faced steward-boy was an obvious possibility to fasten on. And if they had really persuaded themselves that Nunoo was in some way responsible, his employment by Fenton was a continual affront to their sensibilities. They would think Fenton absolutely beyond the pale. A bit of a fool, too, for endangering his own safety, but that would not be their main concern. What they wanted to see was Nunoo blamed—hadn't the police "done their best with him"?—and here was Nunoo reinstated beneath their very eyes. Fenton began to think he would not get rid of Nunoo after all. He would take a stand on his innocence. He would go to the club and brazen things out.

So far he had held in check his curiosity about the details of Hobden's death here in this bungalow as something morbid and unhealthy. He had wanted to put the whole affair out of his mind. But during the next few days it became more and more uncomfortable to sit at the table meal after meal and submit silently to Nunoo's administrations. The boy stood at the sideboard ready to anticipate every need. He watched every movement. Fenton caught his eye sometimes but it was Fenton who looked away. The boy's silent presence was oppressive. Between them was a barrier of constraint which, Fenton believed, came from the same dark subject being in both their minds. The subject had to be ventilated. He did not suppose he would be more successful with his questions than the police, but if he were going to keep Nunoo he wanted to have his own sight of how the boy reacted.

"What happened when your master died?" he asked during

the evening meal when Nunoo was beside him filling his glass. "I should like you to tell me."

"Sir?"

The word might have been an expression either of respectful surprise or of failure to understand the question. Fenton had not yet acquired that fluent use of pidgin English which alone Nunoo could readily understand. The boy had now gone round the table and stood facing him imperturbably from a position by the sideboard.

"The time your master die," Fenton tried again. "What happen?"

He raised his eyes and met Nunoo's across the table. In the yellowish half-light the African's face above the white tunic was featureless except for the whites of his eyes showing as from the recesses of a great darkness.

"I come from town eight o'clock time and Mistah Hobden he dey for floor."

As he spoke Nunoo threw up his head in a quick turn and thrust out his lips towards the sitting-room. It was a movement of the utmost contempt, for if whatever object might once have been there was no longer worth considering. Then he turned his back and began busying himself at the sideboard with the plates and dishes for the next course.

"What happened then?" asked Fenton when Nunoo came round with the meat and vegetables.

"He dead. I go for club for tell the white men. They all come. Mistah Bull he first."

"I see." Fenton had a vision of the mad rush up the steps.

"They make plenty palaver. And then they go call police. Small time pass and then District Commissioner and doctor come from Adantakrom. They take him go."

"Did anyone kill him?" asked Fenton, to draw him out.

"Eh!" The exclamation was sharp. "I no see. I can't tell."

"Did your master kill himself, then?"

"I can't tell. All this be police matter."

"How long you work for Mr. Hobden?"

"Siss year."

"He get some trouble?"

"Me I be steward-boy." The tone was both self-derogatory and indignant. "How I fit tell?"

He had returned to his position by the sideboard and he stood quietly, hands behind his back. He had said his piece, no doubt the same piece which had been repeated many times at police enquiries and the inquest. It was an unshakable statement, unshakable simply because it was true, perhaps. Fenton cast about for another line of enquiry, but he realised the futility. Nunoo would again assume that manner of laconic evasiveness which left the questioner with the feeling that he had been beating the air and had never struck home. Surely if there was nothing to hide one would not have this impression? It was what Gerard must have meant when he said that these people had a way of keeping their mouths shut. Yet it would not have been the first time that a man had done away with himself for reasons which he alone could explain; and if that had happened in this case Nunoo could not have said a word different from what he had said. Even the contempt shown in this jerk of the head might have been no more than contempt for one who had thrown away a valuable possession.

The meal ended without more being said. Fenton retired to one of the khaki-upholstered chairs and Nunoo brought him coffee, padding across the floor-boards with his usual quick steps. Outside the windows the darkness pressed heavily upon the bungalow, seeming to wall it up against the air, and the buzzing of a cricket was the only sound. Fenton,

lying back in the chair with his collar open and his shirt-sleeves rolled up, watched the boy come towards him. As Nunoo bent down with the tray, the face with its flattened nose and out-turned lips came close. The head was lately shaven and only a down of black hair showed. The face was immobile, rigid, as if stamped on with a die. One wondered whether it could register emotions of any kind. Nunoo was the unknown personified. The thoughts and logical processes which lay behind that negro countenance were as thoroughly concealed as the features of the landscape in the darkness outside.

## VIII

GERARD returned to the mine a week after Fenton's arrival. He did so at the request of the mines manager, who descended upon them one morning. Heralded by a violent tooting which scattered the labourers in all directions the dust-covered saloon swung into the yard at the farther end, came rapidly up to the office, and the tall, leather-jacketed figure of Maxwell Fisher, in a wide-brimmed felt hat, had stepped to the ground while the car still rocked on its springs. He had a prominent, high-bridged nose and a grey, close-clipped moustache, and his manner wasted no time at all.

"Hallo, Fenton, you all right? Glad you've come. We need you. How do you like the place? Bungalow all right? Gerard, you'd better come back to the mine on Tuesday. You'll have put our friend here in the picture by then, won't you? I want you to have a look at Number Six Gallery before we take it any farther. And you might find out what the driver of 4024's playing at, will you? I found his lorry stopped at Mile 26 and he wasn't in sight. Which reminds me, the road's bloody awful. We've got four lorries laid up with broken springs now. It's not good enough. You might give Bull a jog, will you? His labourers are lying down on the job."

"He's doing his best," Gerard replied, "but the drivers do crack along, you know."

"Now look here, Gerard, if I say it myself, we're doing a damn fine job at the mine, a damn fine job, and I don't intend to be bitched about just because the Government labourers can't fill in a few pot-holes. The Government are supposed to



maintain that road and they don't do it. I'll be in Kurakessie tomorrow and I'll take it up with the Provincial Commissioner. I'm sorry to go behind Bull's back in this but we can't afford red tape in our show. I've got to get on to the bank now. Fenton, learn all you can between now and Tuesday, and the rest's common sense. I'm relying on you to keep things moving this end. It's a big thing we've got on here and it's going to get bigger."

He was gone, the car swept up on to the road again, and the two subordinates sat down slowly.

"When a man's as confident and pleased with himself as he is, in this country," said Gerard calmly, "he's asking for it."

Fenton made no comment. By Gerard's own testimony there would probably have been no mine at all but for Maxwell Fisher's energy, and all those thousands of tons of linxite which had gone to build houses in England would still be lying beneath the surface of an inaccessible, forest-covered hill-top. Gerard's observation was typical of his others, sceptical and appearing to spring from thoughts which for some reason he kept hidden. It was a manner which several days of close association in the office had rendered first irritating and then something to be ignored. Fenton was no longer inclined to humour it by asking questions which would meet only with more scepticism or a direct snub. Gerard was that sort of man. The Sobosso mine had great possibilities, but they were possibilities, West Africa being what it was, as unattainable as the rainbow's end. The labourers were lazy, the clerk Davis could not be trusted, Fisher was an over-confident ass, and the country was a place to get out of as quickly as possible.

It was an attitude of mind which had no doubt grown gradually, but Hobden's death might well have accentuated

it. "I knew him as well as anybody . . . the best man we ever had." That Gerard should hold the country to blame for Hobden's premature end—"there's something about this country which gets people"—was natural enough; also that West Africa, having caused the death of a man like Hobden, should be branded in Gerard's mind as a hopeless, worthless country undeserving of any regard whatever. It was not therefore easy to penetrate his reserve without touching on feelings which might be painful. Certainly since his remarks about Van Huyt he had shown no further readiness to confide. His job was to hand over the Nyankwa end of the business and return as quickly as possible to the mine, where the real work of excavating linxite was to be done. Fenton came to feel that if he were to get drunk at the club or begin shouting at the labourers in blasphemous language he would be nearer to awakening Gerard's confidence. And sometimes, while the sun beat down on the stuffy little office and dust from the linxite floated in through the window depositing a red film on the desk and papers, Fenton found himself again being regarded by Gerard in silent, not very flattering appraisal, as if he were not thought worthy of being admitted to a knowledge of the whole story. There were also times when Gerard spoke sharply to Davis and the words seemed intended less as a rebuke to the clerk than as an affront to Fenton's liking for him. "He's not really much good, is he?" was in the air even though it was not actually said, and before Gerard left he delivered a further warning.

"You can't be too careful of that fellow. Anything confidential keep locked up in the safe and do the typing yourself."

The number of people to be careful about was growing—Nunoo, Van Huyt, Davis. Suspicion seemed to spread as easily in the tropical sun as the vegetation. It was true

that Davis was supposed to go gossiping to his uncle, who had some influence in the town; but who was there anywhere who would not be naturally inclined to tell his uncle, father or other close relative what went on in his place of employment? Of itself it was not a very serious indictment. Amid all these unsubstantiated hints and suspicions one could only form one's own judgment. Meanwhile there were more tangible matters requiring attention. Two thousand tons of linxite to be sent down the line to Lātuba each week. See that all wagons were fully loaded so that no space was wasted. Ensure that Mr. Asbestos duly performed his contract to keep the labour at Sobosso and Nyankwa supplied with foodstuffs. "If you keep it down to a row a month you'll be lucky," Gerard commented. And as a kind of clarion call to the zealous performance of all these duties there was Mr. Cassap's address to the last annual general meeting of the company's shareholders, a copy of which was carefully preserved in a separate file in the Nyankwa office and which concluded with a generous tribute to the company's staff both African and European for their efforts during the past year.

It was with some desire to ease the constraint between them that on Gerard's last day in the office, Fenton remarked that things did not appear to be going too badly. There was, after all, something unmistakably satisfying in all this linxite, trainload after trainload, being sent down to the coast for shipment. But this was not one of those moments when Gerard could rise above the conviction that most enterprises in West Africa were doomed to eventual failure.

"So far," was his rejoinder. His loose, drooping mouth tightened and he stared with a look of grim preparedness into the yard along the line of wagons and beyond to the rising bank of forest into which the railway made a curving cleft. Fenton

pondered over Gerard's abrupt foreshortening of the company's prospects.

"But what are the snags?" he asked. "Is anything wrong?"

The fear came to him that Gerard during his duties of sinking shafts and cutting galleries had discovered, or had found reason for thinking that he shortly would discover, that the deposits of linxite, like the gold in years past, were less extensive than had been supposed.

Against this possibility Gerard's answer was almost reassuring.

"I don't know," he said, with a resigned fall in his voice. He really did not know. "But there's something going on," he continued. His eyes remained fixed towards the yard but he was not looking for slothful labourers. Slowly he leaned back from the desk and turned towards Fenton. The habitual look of careless disregard had gone and his eyes were steady and calculating.

"I don't suppose you'd understand. You haven't been here long enough. It isn't anything one sees or hears. One just gets a sense. Something's boiling up."

Even with that he seemed to feel he had conveyed more than he could justify, for he added with something of his old manner:

"The people have just elected a new chief. That always causes excitement. Perhaps it's no more than that."

He resumed his gaze through the window, where the last six lorries of the day were being unloaded alongside the wagons. He had relaxed as if yielding against his better judgment to any reassurance his last words might contain. Fenton wanted to ask what was likely to happen, but he sensed that the truth was too intangible for an answer, being hidden in the forest's encircling mass of silent, column-like trees whose very impene-

trableness inspired the notion of mysterious concealment.

Gerard was not offering to say more, but Fenton made one more attempt to draw him out.

"Do you think Van Huyt means to cause trouble?"

"He may, old boy, he may."

"But whatever can he do?"

"Well, he wants the linxite. He may decide to go after it. If he really means business he can cause labour trouble, spread rumours, depress the value of the shares and buy up the company cheap. He's up to doing all that, with his influence."

"But even if the company did change hands the work would still go on."

"But not with me. Or with any of the others. When you've got your own little show going—and not so little either—you don't like to see it taken over by a fellow like that. He'll stick at nothing if he really gets going."

Fenton sought for a form of words to pursue the matter, but Gerard was getting up.

"You're sure there's nothing else you want to know? Fisher will be looking in pretty often, I should think."

It was an obvious hint.

"I don't think so, thanks. You seem to have covered the ground."

"I'll be getting along, then. I'll take the first lorry back in the morning. Send it up to the rest-house on its way, will you?"

## IX

"I'VE just come round to see how you are," Stanley Bull called out from the driving seat of his battered old tourer. "You're quite a stranger. How goes it?"

Carrying the gardening fork with which he had been working, Fenton went across the grass towards him.

"I'm 'all right, thanks. . . . Nice of you to look in."

"Not at all, not at all," said Bull, getting his stout form out of the car. "Very good neighbours we are in Nyankwa, you know. Always minding each other's affairs." He laughed, and looked round at the freshly-turned flower-beds and borders. "Been doing a bit of gardening, eh? I scarcely know the old place. I'm afraid gardening wasn't poor old Hobden's cup of tea. He preferred golf. Do you play golf?"

"No," said Fenton, jabbing at the gravel with the fork. "I've never learnt."

"Well, Nyankwa's a very good place to start. If you can play on this course you'll play anywhere. Quite a few people have had their first golfing lessons in Nyankwa. Jack Thompson, for instance. You've heard of him, of course—who hasn't? And last year he won the Colony Championship. Rita Van Huyt, too. It was old Hobden who used to give her lessons. But she doesn't play now. She's not as fit as she was. She ought to go home. Nyankwa's no place for a girl. You haven't met them yet, have you?"

"The Van Huyts? No."

"Come round to the club this evening. It'll do you good."

He cast his eyes up at the bungalow and back again at

Fenton. "They generally drop in on Wednesdays. Van Huyt's a character. So's Rita for that matter." He chuckled, and his small blue eyes gave Fenton a meaning look behind which was all the knowledge of certain highly-flavoured events in the Van Huyt household, and a readiness to enlarge on them if required.

"Yes," said Fenton, not echoing the chuckle. "She must be."

"There he is now," said Stanley Bull with a nod towards the golf-course. "Playing his twice-weekly round with Dave. The two financial wizards of Nyankwa. He never plays with anyone else. He never really talks with anyone else."

They walked over to the hedge to get a better view and stood looking down on the golf-course. They could see the two figures walking up towards them to the tee some fifty yards away: Dave Mackinnon of the Guinea Bank, stocky, red-faced, white-haired, in white shorts, keeping level with his companion in short steps, chin well to the fore; and Van Huyt, tall, burly, in grey flannel trousers, striding in long easy paces and using one of his clubs as a walking-stick. Fenton had seen them on a previous evening. They always appeared in earnest conversation. Once he had seen Mackinnon move his arm in a quick downward gesture as if in vigorous disagreement with something Van Huyt had said. Behind them, well out of earshot, were their caddies, two black urchins in loose ragged shirts struggling with the bags of clubs which were much too big for their diminutive figures.

"Is he Dutch?" Fenton asked.

"His ancestors may have been. But there's nothing very Dutch about him now. Good solid English gold, that's what he is today." The deep chuckle was repeated and they both looked on while Van Huyt prepared himself for the drive off

the tee. In every movement was an easy self-assurance, a perfect command.'

"He came out here thirty years ago as a Government engineer," continued Bull, "but he soon gave that up to make more money on his own. He set up in the transport business. His partner let him down and he lost everything. There he goes! Lovely drive, eh? He tried one or two things. Then he went in for gold prospecting. For years he had no luck at all. Lived in tents and native compounds most of the time. His wife and daughter were in England and they must have had a time of it too. There's not a square yard of the country round here he doesn't know. Or a word of the language. He knows more of the local history and customs than the people themselves. One day he came in to Nyankwa as down and out as ever a man was. He was finished. Just about to be sent home by the Government as a pauper. But he'd heard something. Some rumour about some old native workings up near the source of the Sansu River, out towards the frontier, and long since abandoned owing to some sort of ju-ju on the place.

"It was Dave who fitted him out for that last expedition. Everybody thought Dave was a fool. At that time gold-mining companies were folding up like packs of cards. The stuff just didn't seem to be there. But the rumour was true. Alluvial deposits. They say he offered Dave a partnership. But Dave never took it. So far as one knows. He's still manager of the Guinea Bank, anyway. Poor old Dave! Can't hold his whisky as he could once. Trouble is he sometimes thinks he can."

They watched the two players move away from the tee and down the slope. All over the golf-course and the surrounding ridge was the gilded greenness of evening as the sun declined.



"Yes," Stanley Bull continued, "they'll finish up at the club in about twenty minutes. Then he'll drive home and come back with his daughter round about seven. Why don't you come along?"

"I think I will."

"Good, we'll be glad to see you." Bull paused before adding, with another of his direct looks, "I shouldn't take too much notice of young Dai Williams if I were you. He rubs up against everyone sooner or later. He was pretty close to Hobden, you've got to remember that. And he's chasing Rita, that's his main trouble."

"And is the attraction mutual?"

"It's anybody's guess. Judge for yourself tonight. They'll both be there. Though I should think she's flying a bit higher than that myself. She's screws and tintacks that girl, I sometimes think, though you've got to admire her performance. She's—well, she's bitter. She oughtn't to have come out here."

Fenton reached the club soon after seven. The presence of a long black saloon, latest American model, showed that the Van Huyts had arrived. The scent of a cigar as he approached the group outside bore the same message. The table and chairs were placed as on the night of Fenton's arrival, but this time there were two lamps, each on its tall stand. Near one of the lamps was a second table set out with bottles and glasses on a white cloth. For its most important member the club made a special effort, and there he sat, at the head of the table with a cigar in his hand, looking very much like a chairman presiding at a board meeting in the City, while the rest of the members looked very much like directors who did not mean to contradict him.

His head was massive and squarish and his dark thinning hair was brushed back hard and smooth. It contrasted with

the rugged features. One had the impression that, however low his fortunes, his hair had always had the same well-groomed smoothness. It was a silent proclamation that, although he had been a gold-digger and lived hard, he was still a gentleman accustomed to the best society and the best clubs. His eyes were narrow and heavy-lidded, never free from shrewd, steady calculation about everybody and everything before them. The face itself, pale in the lamplight, was lined and worn, more so than that loose, easy swing on the golf-course might have suggested. The many years of hardship and struggle in an exacting climate had left their firm imprint. His lips were thick and suggestive of a readiness to savour with relish anything good served up to him.

When Stanley Bull led Fenton forward to be introduced—it was like a presentation—Van Huyt broke off his conversation with Mackinnon, his neighbour, and got up heavily in a visible effort to observe the conventions. He extended his hand to Fenton with an inclination of his head in mock respect while on his face was the beginning of a disdainful smile.

"The new recruit," he observed quietly.

"Yes, I am," said Fenton, taking him up in a way that drew upon himself the eyes of everybody present.

"You'll find this a bit of an awkward squad," laughed Van Huyt's daughter from half-way along the table. "Come and sit down, Mr. Fenton, and tell me how you managed to tame the Lion. Dave hasn't forgiven you, you know. He thinks you've displaced him in the Lion's affections. And I hear you're making a garden. So you're taming not only lions, but the tropical flora as well. Where will you end, I wonder?"

The general laughter which she aroused almost put him off his balance, but for a second he managed to hold Van Huyt's

eyes despite the amused contempt which showed there. Then he turned to look for a vacant chair.

"Come and meet our only lady member," said Stanley Bull with loud heartiness. "Nyankwa's most eligible spinster."

"Thank you, Stanley," said the girl. "You really do say the nicest things, don't you? Sit here, Mr. Fenton. For that remark I really do banish Mr. Bull to exterior darkness at the end of the table."

She indicated the place beside her from which the Inspector of Works had risen at Fenton's entry.

"Thank you," he said, lowering himself into the wicker chair. "Good evening, Miss Van Huyt, how do you do?"

"Good evening, Mr. Fenton, how do *you* do? And how do you like Nyankwa? That's the first question to be disposed of, isn't it?"

She was smiling, but her eyes were intense and penetrating. The just perceptible slant at which they were set was accentuated by her high cheekbones and thin arching eye brows. Her dark hair was gathered in a small pile above her forehead and combed back behind her ears into loose curls. Bull had said she did not look well, but certainly in the light of the lamps at least the face was fresh and alert. Its freshness, indeed, was something to make Nyankwa seem very far removed. There was the faintest aroma of a perfume which classed her, much as the cigar classed her father, as in some way alien to the present environment. For a moment Fenton felt that he had not travelled at all. European faces which were sallow, lined, worn and exclusively masculine were a natural part of the local picture. But a face which was the antithesis of these qualities, having smooth white skin and sensitive features alive with expression, gave him a jerk back into a scheme of life three thousand miles away.

"You don't answer," she said lightly. "Don't you like Nyankwa? It won't be very flattering to us all if you say that. Though really," she continued, with a smiling glance round the table as if she were speaking for everybody, "you've seen so little of us that perhaps you've not yet made up your mind."

It was a comment on his isolation to which he might have retorted if at that moment the steward-boy had not placed a glass before him and leaned over to fill it. Drinks, it seemed, were on Van Huyt tonight. The boy's shoulder and outstretched arm came between Felton and the girl. When they were removed he said simply:

"I haven't moved around much yet. I'm still settling in."

She responded quickly, but with a note of seriousness she had not yet sounded.

"Don't settle in too deeply or you won't get out again. It's a mistake everybody makes. They leave it too late. It's really a mistake to come out here at all."

She lowered her voice for these words and the stare with which her slanting eyes fixed him made her face almost sphinx-like.

"How do you like Nyankwa yourself?" he asked. "You're quite an old coaster now, aren't you?"

He smiled as he spoke, but it was not the most considerate remark he could have made, with its implied allusion to the reason for her continued presence in Nyankwa. But it had touched him on a raw nerve to be told that he had made a mistake in coming to this country and that he ought to get out when he could. Such advice was too close to what his own feelings had been at the time of Gerard's revelation. Besides, although she had her own obvious reasons for disgust with the place, they did not entitle her to pass judgment on it for everybody else. "You're prejudiced," was what he wanted to say.

He seemed to be drifting into the position of holding a brief for Nyankwa. Well, he would not turn the brief down. He made up his mind, there and then, in defiance of her stare and as he watched her face slowly colouring, that he did like Nyankwa. He liked Davis, he liked the boys in the yard, he liked seeing the train pull out with another two hundred tons of linxite for the coast, he liked the fresh early mornings and the golden-green lustre of the late afternoons, he experienced an upsurge of confidence in Nunoo. He was not going to throw all that over for a few biased words from Rita Van Huyt.

He had made her pause, but in a moment her face relaxed into the easiest of smiles and she said brightly:

"Oh, I think Nyankwa's the deadeast of dead ends. Everybody else thinks the same. The only difference between me and the old coasters is that they always come back. And I shall never come back."

With a final laugh she leaned back in her chair, crossed her legs beneath her long evening skirt and looked away from him, her eyes ranging alertly along the table. It was much as if, having worked one subject to a conclusion, she was looking for fresh fields to conquer. He was left a little depressed. Not that Nyankwa, pin-pricked with lights down there in the hollow, was a place which could normally expect to enjoy the presence of a person like Rita Van Huyt for even five minutes. It ought to be thankful for what it had had. There she was, perfumed and brilliant, sitting in the midst of a West African forest with a handful of hard-bitten exiles. Nyankwa was lucky to have had even a glimpse of her. It was lucky to have had this glimpse of what the outside world could do. And whenever she chose to leave no one would have a right to feel aggrieved. It was only that Fenton suffered a pang to

hear Nyankwa condemned, as if he were committed to a hopeless cause for which no one of account cared in the least.

He wanted to ask when she expected to leave, but she was too much engaged in the general conversation. The attendance tonight was certainly a full one. In addition to Bull and Mackinnon there were Williams, whom he sometimes found glowering at him across the table; a tall thin individual whom he could now identify as Hoskice, the local manager of the Amalgamated African Trading Corporation; his assistant, Peters, who looked after the Corporation's workshop, where the Soboso Mining Company's lorries went for their all too frequent repairs; three men from Johnson and Holloway's saw-mill opposite the railway station whose names Fenton could not yet distinguish; and one or two others to whom no one had yet thought of introducing him, but whom he believed to be Government officials of some kind.

"When ought the cuttings to be planted out?" the girl was asking across the table.

"Just before the rains start. That's the best time. Put 'em in then."

"But you don't think I'm going to put them in myself, do you? That would be fatal. I never touch a thing now. At first I used to take immense trouble, putting them in with my own hands with manure, water, shade, everything you'd think a plant could need. But they never came to anything. Salifu, on the other hand, puts them in with no more than a stamp of his foot and they're half-way up the side of the house before mine have even started."

"That's the curse of this country," said Stanley Bull. "Life's too easy for these people. They only have to shove a stick in the ground and it grows. They don't know what work is. My road labourers are the only chaps who know how to

work. I've taught 'em. You don't see them sitting on their backsides now when you come round a bend. You see 'em working before they see you coming."

"And when are these famous rains going to begin?" asked Rita. "We hear enough about them. But judging from the state of our lawn you'd think the Sahara was setting in."

"In about four months' time, I should think," answered a man across the table.

"That's right," said Van Huyt. "It'll be coming down pretty heavily in four months, I should think. But it's not everyone who's looking forward to the rains, is it, Mr. Fenton, eh?"

"I beg your pardon?"

But Van Huyt only rolled his tongue round the inside of his lower lip and smiled comfortably as if from a position of great height and strength from which he knew he could not be dislodged. On Fenton this allusion was completely lost. He could make nothing of it. Perhaps the rain made linxite difficult to handle. But the same must have happened in past seasons.

"Well, really, Father," said the girl with a laugh. "Mr. Fenton will be quite worried if you go on like that. After so many days he comes down here to meet us and he hears you talking about rain as if it were going to wash all the linxite away or something." There was a laugh from Van Huyt at this, loud and grating. "Aren't you alarmed, Mr. Fenton?" she asked, swinging round on him. "You mustn't pay any attention to these old coast stories, you know. You want to be on your guard."

"There are one or two people to be guarded against, certainly," he replied.

"Oh, really?" she said, dropping her head with a laugh.

"So of course you don't believe anything I say either! All my warnings will have gone for nothing, I can see."

"And what are the warnings you've been giving him?" asked Dave Mackinnon. "Perhaps there are one or two which we could all profit by."

"You!" she exclaimed. "Nothing can be done for you. All my warnings are for young men who've got a prospect of twenty or thirty years in this preposterous country. They can be summed up in one word. Quit! But perhaps you'd like to give a warning yourself?"

"Aye! Stay single. That's my advice. It's a poor sort of country for married men. The women come out here with missionary zeal and start organising things as they would at home, an' when they find they're not making much headway and they can't get their hair done or their dresses cleaned or their best bits of china replaced, they run over to their neighbours for cups of tea and spend the morning exchanging complaints. An' the next thing is the husband finds himself driven into moving heaven an' airth for a transfer. There was young Pat Tierney who was D.C. here in '28 and brought his wife out despite all the advice I could give him over more bottles of whisky than I like to think of in the present austerity. Six months later he was out of the country understudying his father-in-law on the sales side of a small paint factory. In a year or two the business was bust and since then the best D.C. we ever had has been teaching in a school for small boys. He was the only man who ever looked like making anything of the Nyankwas. It's a standing example of the dangers of feminine intervention."

Rita took all this in her stride as well.

"Anyway, Dave," she said, still leaning back and keeping her arms spread along the sides of the chair, "we must all be



thankful that no one has ever tried to entice you away. We must thank Nyankwa for that, I suppose. Its reputation has become such that no one has felt able to come and make the attempt. There can scarcely be any other reason, can there? Of course, it couldn't be your reputation."

There was a shout of laughter from all round the table. While Mackinnon was speaking there had been suspense. They had listened as his words seemed to go nearer and nearer to the bounds of what was properly permissible. On the faces of all there had been an apprehensive yet pleasurable anticipation of what he would say next. If they thought he was going too far—Dave Mackinnon could no longer be relied upon after two or three whiskies—they nevertheless enjoyed seeing him go, even if their enjoyment had to be held in check. Nor had Van Huyt himself sought to interfere. During Mackinnon's words he had sat back in his chair like a client contented with what his lawyer was doing for him. When by such a seemingly easy sleight of hand Rita gave the company the opportunity to indulge in a laugh at Mackinnon's expense rather than at hers, Van Huyt took the cigar from his mouth and joined in the laughter, throwing back his head, opening his mouth wide, his heavy-lidded eyes tightening into slits. For Fenton it was like watching a drama in which the heroine, playing a lone hand, had pulled off a triumph of tactics. It was a triumph of tactics only, for there remained the whole atmosphere of implication against which she still had to contend. There was not a man who did not regard the scene in Van Huyt's house after her arrival as having its humorous side. It was the humorous side which for them was uppermost and on which they naturally fixed. It was not the one on which Rita herself naturally fixed.

Before the laughter had quite gone and before anyone else

could speak, she turned her attention to Williams across the table.

"And what do you think, Dai? Surely you must have thought this matter out. Do you think Nyankwa's all right for a married man?"

This direct question to someone who was supposed to be 'chasing' her was also something the others could savour.

"It's no country for any man, married or unmarried," declared the Welshman rapidly, "but there has to be someone to run the place, I suppose. They can't do it themselves, can they now? Only they'll have to manage without me after this tour. Five years of Empire-building is enough for me, and I don't care who knows it. Like yourself, Rita, I'm not coming back when I get out."

"Then I've made one convert at least. We'll travel back on the same ship, Dai"—he might make what he could of that—"and we'll lean over the stern looking back at Latuba together. Won't you change your mind and join us?" she asked Fenton.

She turned her face full upon him and again he saw the white oval countenance with its thin, high-pointing eyebrows, intense dark eyes and mouth now drawn in a tight little smile.

"In about eighteen months, perhaps, when I get my leave," he replied.

"But that'll be much too late. We'll be away long before then. Father was on the telephone to the shipping agents this morning."

"Not about passages though," said Van Huyt dryly. "There are still one or two little things to settle before I can get away," and as if at his own understatement he laughed out again. "But there wouldn't," he went on, "be any difficulty about a passage for you if you want one."

Fenton saw it then. The lifting of her eyebrows and the contraction of her forehead had all the quality of one straining to hold up an almost insupportable load for just a while longer. Much of what she had said during the evening had had a note of ostentation. It had been a display, with plenty of audacity, and Fenton could now see the effort it had cost her; and presumably the effort had to be made not only on this occasion, but on all the other occasions when she met people. By no other way could she bear up against the atmosphere. Everybody knew Van Huyt wanted to send her home, everybody knew why, and everybody knew she did not mean to go without him. She might so easily have become in these circumstances a silenced, pathetic figure, shy of showing herself and causing embarrassment whenever she appeared. Such a figure was just what she could not allow herself to be, so she came down to the club and hit out boldly. The essential thing was to hold the stage, keep in the lead, to make people laugh. And if at times her manner was transparent and if at times she did not emerge from the encounter entirely unscathed, yet even then a bold front was better than a retiring one.

Her resources were seemingly inexhaustible.

"What I wanted to ask while we're all here," she continued, "is whether anyone wants a steward-boy. Our third steward, Issaka, really has nothing to do. He doesn't even have to carry water now that Father's installed this pumping engine. He's not a bad boy. I was thinking, Mr. Fenton, that perhaps you, as you've only just arrived, might care to give him a trial if you're not fixed up."

Her expression was one of polite, helpful enquiry, but clearly she could not be completely guileless. She must have heard that he had taken on Hobden's steward-boy and she

must have been aware of how the matter was regarded by the other members.' Her enquiry, therefore, could only be considered as an unfriendly move to embarrass him. He had not, of course, given her any grounds for being particularly friendly, or any reason why she should distinguish him from the others in his attitude to her own special problem. Whether for him also the humorous side was uppermost she did not know; and although he regretted that she had not waited to test him in this matter, yet he could see that she was not one to go out of her way in search of allies. She classed him with the rest and went ahead accordingly.

For some moments he regarded her, conscious of the silence in which everybody waited for his answer.

"I am fixed up, as a matter of fact," he said at last, and added—she was not the only one who could be bold—"I've taken on Hobden's boy, you know. He's first-rate. Does all the cooking, too. I don't know how I'd manage without him."

Rita's eyes widened. From someone across the table—Fenton believed it was Dai Williams, but he still had his eyes on the girl—there came a sound very much like a snort. But he went on:

"There's advantage in having a boy who knows the bungalow so well, don't you think? I don't have to show him anything. He just carries on. He knows everything! You and your father must pay me a visit when I'm properly settled. Then you'll see for yourself."

She flinched back. The effect of his words amazed him. His smile found no response. Of course, for Nunoo she would have the general antipathy. Nevertheless her sudden start was surprising. He saw himself being scrutinised by the slanting eyes down to the very depths; and as he had nothing

to hide he could face her with equanimity. Her lips parted, but it was a moment before she spoke.

"If you're keeping Nunoo," she said in a brittle tone, "then of course you won't want Issaka. I—thought your present arrangements was only temporary."

And for an instant he wished it was. But he was not going back on that now.

"If you will send him to me at the end of the month," Hoskice put in, "I should be happy to give him a trial."

She turned with relief.

"Really, Mr. Hoskice? I should hate to turn him out with no prospects at all."

"I could not go above three pounds a month," Hoskice added, his spectacles glinting. "It's as well to get that clear at the outset, I think."

"Three pounds!" exclaimed one of the saw-mill men. "The Corporation pays your boys' wages for you, doesn't it? Two million pounds' profit last year and you can't go above three pounds! He'll expect more than two bob a day if he works for the Corporation."

"It is not the policy of my company to spoil the market," said Hoskice solemnly. "Three pounds is the normal rate for a junior steward-boy and I am precluded from paying more. Like all our employees he will of course be permitted to buy goods in our store at wholesale prices."

"And his wife will immediately sell them in the market at retail prices. It's a great life. . . . You haven't by any chance got a vacancy for a mill foreman as well, have you?"

"Unfortunately, no. We are not in the timber business."

"It's about the only business you're not in," commented the saw-mill man. "You've got an interest in the linxite mine too, haven't you?"

“Again, unfortunately, no. You will find a full list of our holdings and subsidiaries in our annual report. I shall be delighted to give you a copy.”

“Eyewash,” said the mill foreman, getting up. “I wouldn’t believe a word of it. Anyone want a lift home?”

## X

GERARD'S departure was a relief and, in the days which followed, the Sobosso Mining Company's new assistant manager in Nyankwa viewed with satisfaction and some pride the yard's activity. As he walked along past the lorries he enjoyed the men's outlandish shouts and grinning salutations and the sight of the linxite being flung shovelful by shovelful into the wagons. As the morning advanced the still air became sweat-ridden and heavy with exhaust fumes, but the vigorous activity did not slacken. The daily despatch of this reddish-brown substance from the heart of the West African forest was a relentless process, the forest itself being a mute, unchanging spectator. At midday the Latuba-bound goods train would appear trundling round the bend and, blowing off steam, come to a creaking halt by the yard, pointsmen and shunters would run shouting along the line, there would be a great banging and clattering to and fro of wagons, and another two hundred tons would be taken on their way.

The day always began with the early morning roll-call of the labourers which Fenton attended before breakfast. He rode down on an old bicycle which he had found in the store behind the office. Every thirty minutes the work was interrupted by the timekeeper striking a three-foot length of rail suspended from a pole half-way along the yard. This was the signal for a change of shift, because experience had shown that if the wagons were to be loaded in time the men had to work at full pressure in half-hourly spells. Thus the yard presented throughout the day a spectacle of men working

with frantic haste, spades flying and backs dipping and rising without a break, while the reliefs squatted and sprawled in groups under the few small trees which still grew along the bottom of the bank that shelved down steeply from the road.

To be ready for the midday train was always a touch-and-go affair. In the afternoon it was easier because the wagons were not collected until midnight, which could mean no more than working in the dark until they were loaded by the light of paraffin lamps placed on the roofs of the drivers' cabs. But in the morning the pace had to be maintained. On the first few days Fenton, when the time drew near, would look anxiously at the railway signal, note with apprehension the amount of linxite which still had to be loaded, and call to the men to get on quickly. But he could not speak in a way they understood and as likely as not they would stop altogether and look at him with perplexed grins. So he would have to call Davis, who would come out of the office in his usual immaculate attire, walking quickly but never running, with a ready though questioning smile. When he understood what was required he would break into a few rapid words of mixed vernacular and English, indicate the signal with a turn of his head and an outward thrusting movement of his lips, and again there would be the bending of backs and shrill exclamations of energy.

"It is all right, sir," he would say in quiet assurance. "They will finish. It is all right, sir."

Fenton could not feel sometimes that he was playing an integral part in the organisation. He watched it, but he did not belong to it. The organisation lived in these grotesquely featured beings with faces scored by tribal markings as if a red-hot toasting fork had been drawn downwards across the cheeks; who were continually shouting at each other in high-



pitched tones when only a pace or two separated them; whose incessant chatter and excited gestures seemed to come from a particular sort of energy not given to other mortals; whose bare feet and bare knees gave them a youthful, immature appearance even when their faces were old. The impossibility of knowing what they said or what they thought put them on a plane apart. Their minds were beyond all possible contact.

The timekeeper was an old man in a round white cap and blue smock which reached to his ankles. A short grey beard hung loosely from his chin. All day he sat placidly by the suspended rail watching the cheap alarm clock which was placed on a stool before him. At the hour and half-hour he struck at the rail three or four times with a piece of discarded iron in carefully measured blows, looked up and down the yard to see that due notice had been taken and sat down again. He was paid more than the other labourers. The acquisition of that single piece of literacy which enabled him to tell the hours and the half-hours had raised him to a highly respected position of responsibility. He was the key-man. Without Braima Donga in his place the daily tempo must have slowed to a stop.

His courtesy was embarrassing. Every time Fenton passed him he rose from his chair and bowed. He had the dignity of a patriarch. Fenton became reluctant to go into the yard at all. He could see just as well from the office window. His going outside made the men work no quicker, rather they paused to watch him pass. "If you have any slacking," Gerard had advised, "go out and sack the first man you see looking at you. They're bound to try something on you sooner or later." But so far he had seen no need for such measures. He hoped he never would, with Braima Donga looking on like that.

The old man's midday meal was brought to him by his

granddaughter, a girl of eight or nine who wore a loose blue dress with short wide sleeves, a piece of the same material being tied round her head in the form of an oversize, floppy sort of turban as worn by all Donga women. On the top of the turban was balanced a small enamel bowl containing the food. Her expression and manner had the settled purpose of an adult. One did not see the tribal marks on her face unless one was near. Otherwise one noticed only the slender brown arms as they reached up and lifted down the bowl with a natural grace of movement, and the pin-points of light from the ear-rings just below the folds of the turban. When the old man had finished eating she took the bowl to one of the drums of water by the office and washed it out, scooping up the water with a dexterous twist of her hand and spilling the minimum. Not yet for these people from the arid north had water become a commodity whose endless supply could be taken for granted.

"They're not worth it, I tell you," said Dai Williams at the club with vicious aggressiveness, his native intonation rising and falling. "Why should we stay here just to be abused, can anyone tell me that? There was an article in the *Kurakessie Times* this morning saying that all Sanitary Superintendents should be Africans and that the Sanitary Superintendent at Nyankwa was too hard on the butchers, condemning too many carcasses, and that was what kept the price of meat up. And if I didn't condemn bad meat and there was an epidemic they'd want to know what I was paid for, wouldn't they? Last year at Adantakrom I condemned a cow, and the night after it was buried my own labourers dug it up again. And when I sacked them they paid a letter-writer to petition the Governor and I had to take them back. Well then, let them have their own Sanitary Superintendents,

whatever, and if they manage to make more than one latrine per ten thousand people and if every water supply in the town isn't fouled in six months I'll eat the cow myself."

"They'll have to learn by experience, I suppose," Fenton ventured. "My clerk——"

"Experience? And what have they been having for centuries but experience? Wouldn't you think by this time they'd know that if they didn't change their habits they'd go on having more disease than anywhere else in the world?"

"I was only going to say that my clerk isn't the sort who would dig up a dead cow."

"He would if he could sell it, though, wouldn't he now? And he started up this Youth Association which sent me a resolution that the control of the market was too strict. You'd probably find he wrote this article, I shouldn't be surprised."

It was the sheer night-after-night sameness of the bungalow which had driven Fenton to the club that evening. Whatever the conversation which might have to be listened to, he could not go on sitting alone in the quiet, empty house. In one of Fisher's lightning visits he had suggested repainting.

"Gets you down, does it?" was Fisher's comment. "You'll have to make do, I'm afraid. We want new lorries, new machinery. Everything we can save has to go into stepping up production. It's the future we've got to think of. Out at the mine we all live in Nissen huts. It's an old Government bungalow that you've got. We were damn lucky to get it. Beat the Trading Corporation by a short head. Hoskice has to live over his store in the town."

"Look here," Fisher had continued, pausing on his way out, "this is going to be the biggest thing in West Africa. Forest Reef Gold Mine offered me three thousand a year the other day to go over to them. But I turned it down. What's

your salary? Fifty a month? Forest Reef will give you seventy to do just what you're doing here. And a frigidaire in your bungalow as well. You can join them if you like. Never mind your contract with us. Tear it up. But if you take my advice you'll stick."

The remarks were characteristic of Maxwell Fisher, but nevertheless Fenton was fortified and they helped him to think of bigger things than Williams's resentful strictures. The possibility of participating in big developments strengthened his reserves. Fisher knew what he was talking about. He had started the mine from nothing at all. What Fenton had to do, he told himself, was to hold on; and before long he might find himself in charge of twice—five times—the organisation he had now. It was a future to think of. It made the club seem of very small account indeed. Williams could go off and look after the drains of a municipality in South Wales if he chose. Nyankwa could afford to see him go, with Rita Van Huyt as well.

This evening, therefore, he had not thought so much of the awkwardness, the very obvious effort at readjustment on the part of the others, which his appearance at the club always seemed to produce. This was despite the words he had heard just after turning in off the road. "I shouldn't care to live there myself." Stanley Bull's voice had reached him from the murmur of other voices round the table. The words could have referred to something quite different, such as living in the far Northern Provinces. But in that case there wouldn't have been the abrupt halt in the conversation as he approached and a look on their faces as if they had been detected in talking of a forbidden topic. It was only for a moment, and then there was a hasty chorus of 'Good evenings' and offers of drinks and a making-way of chairs; while Dave Mackinnon,

with adroitness of mind in an embarrassing situation, began to talk of a past District Commissioner in Nyankwa who had been used to holding court on the veranda of his bungalow in the early morning, at the same time calling out instructions to the garden-boy pruning the roses below. . . .

They had been talking about him, of course. But he sat calmly, looking once more into the dark void. Later when Williams began to work off his feelings he had even been able to interpose some mildly corrective remarks, though the only effect of these was to stimulate Williams further.

"They gave me a choice between this place and one of the East African colonies and I chose this because the salary was higher and they said there were better chances of promotion; people die off more quickly, I suppose. I must have been mad. But it's not the climate that gets you, it's the people; the best of them in the end let you down."

The immensity of the night reduced the words to insignificance. They were like the yappings of a puppy which had strayed into a cathedral. They were to be ignored, set at naught, and the strength of feeling behind them was so much wasted effort. He could go if he wanted, no one would be worse off, no one was trying to stop him, there was no need to make a fuss. But Williams was making a fuss. He spoke like a man who had suffered wrongs and wanted to get even.

"My first night in the colony I was told," Williams went on, with one hand on his glass while the steward-boy poured out another drink, "that the only thing to worry about in this country was how to get out of it, and I have never heard a truer word since."

From the laughter which greeted Williams's remarks, as when a common enemy is scored off, it was clear that his animosity was generally shared. The handful of men from

overseas sitting in the circle of light on the quiet hillside above the town were banded together in their isolation and remoteness.

Fenton remembered his emotions in Mr. Cassap's office when West Africa had first been mentioned as his destination. It had been the first pull on him of an obscure influence which deep in his consciousness had met a response. Ninety-nine out of a hundred others would not have felt this response. They would have regarded employment by the West African Concessions Syndicate as no more than a means of livelihood and in so doing would have had everything in common with the other inhabitants of Nyankwa's residential area. They would have shot out Nunoo, had their laugh with Williams, and looked upon the Van Huyt domestic situation as a matter for semi-humorous comment; and their dealings with the indigenous population would have been strictly limited, as disagreeable necessities, to the job in hand.

Fenton was conscious throughout his whole being of living beside a great mystery which he wanted to explore. The mystery was there in the town which he saw daily from the placid, park-like slopes of the ridge as a splurge of yellowish, iron-roofed habitations, and whose streets when he went down there were filled with black skins, prognathous heads, garish costumes, and a clamour of unintelligible cries. It was also there, tonight as on all other nights, in the forest which, though unseen, made its presence felt by the very heaviness of the silence. He could not dismiss all this as so much stage property and live regardless of it. Or if he did, he was neglecting an opportunity. An opportunity for what, he could not have defined; but at least an opportunity for learning something fundamental about the world's make-up. Here people lived according to ideas and values which in essentials could

not have changed for centuries. But the question was how to get beneath the surface of the life which animated the town; how to know what was in the minds of all these people who really did look, as their own legend claimed, as if they had come out of a hole in the ground; how to understand that rapid, high-pitched chatter which sounded as if they lived continually in a state of the keenest excitement. There were expressions, too: the swift sidelong glance of primitive stealth and in the eyes themselves the glitter of unreasoning fear.

Fenton remembered that as a child he had once been taken, with the other children of the establishment to whose care he was then committed, to one of those comprehensive exhibitions which are organised from time to time for the instructive entertainment and gratification of the British public. One of the features had been an African village. In a carefully roped-off enclosure, the steel-girdered roof of the building rising to an apex high overhead, three or four huts of mud and thatch had been erected and in the intervening space a dozen or so dispirited natives of both sexes in traditional costume were to be seen cooking their meals, weaving cloth with the aid of an intricate and not very efficient apparatus, and making pots with no apparatus at all. Inside the ropes were a few baskets of cocoa or coffee-beans and prominently displayed between the baskets was a notice: DO NOT TOUCH.

Obediently he had kept behind the ropes and had not touched, together with many thousands of other visitors for whom the African village, real natives, was the highlight of the exhibition. Here in Nyankwa there were no ropes or notices, but so far he had not got any closer. His only attempt, with Nunoo, had been frustrated by a barrier infinitely less

traversable than the ropes provided to keep within bounds the inquisitiveness of throngs of sightseers.

From the detached standpoint which as a European he inevitably occupied, it was all too easy to view the native population as a conglomerate mass instead of as a number of individuals with separate identities, each with a distinctive life and interests. Very recently he had received an illustration of the truth and he decided to take the opportunity of thanking the club steward for his present of eggs that morning.

"Atta, you sent me some eggs" this morning. Thank you very much. Very kind of you."

"Yessah! T'ank you, sah!" Eyes and teeth gleamed.

"And bring these gentlemen another drink, will you?"

"Yessah."

The white-clad figure went off briskly to the club-house.

"Been dashing you eggs, has he?" said Stanley Bull. "He must be meaning to ask you for something one of these days."

"I don't think so. I've given his brother a job. It's in return for that."

The quickening of interest was palpable.

"Job, eh? . . . As stewart-boy?"

"No. I've no need for another steward-boy. As watchman."

"'M. We do get the odd burglar up here, of course. Not very often, though. What you really want is burglar-proof screens on the windows."

"I don't mean at the bungalow. I mean at the yard. The other night-watchman left. Said he was getting too old or something."

"I see." Stanley Bull chuckled. "Well, I hope you don't find all the eggs bad."



One employed a new watchman, a perfectly normal thing to do, the watchman's brother turned out to be the club steward, and the club steward came through with a present of half a dozen eggs in appreciation. It demonstrated the existence of undercurrents of life ramifying into unexpected places, which in the seclusion of the residential area were as much concealed as is marine life from ships passing overhead. Kwesi Amma's prompt application for the vacancy had come as a relief because it had cut short the need to look farther afield. He had brought a testimonial from the Nyankwa State Secretary, who declared that Kwesi Amma had faithfully watched the chief's empty palace for twelve years and that "nothing strange was found to have occurred in that time." But since the palace was now, "by the merciful dispensation of the God who guards our land," once more happily occupied, his services were no longer required. Kwesi Amma's glaringly prominent eyes, Fenton decided, could not legitimately be counted against him. He bore the stamp of the old and faithful retainer. The subsequent discovery that he was the club steward's brother helped to confirm his reliability. Fenton was especially pleased that the matter had turned out well because this was practically the first time he had acted without asking Davis's advice. Davis was very willing and very efficient, but it did not seem right to be wholly dependent on him. Besides, Gerard's warnings could not be entirely ignored. So when the old watchman had finished his long and rambling account of his reasons for wanting to retire Fenton had merely remarked, "This is a nuisance. We'll have to look for somebody else." And Davis, after a short deferential pause, had said, "There is a man outside to see you, sir. I think he may be an applicant for the post." And that had been pretty well all there was to it.

"Don't go yet," he said to Williams, who was getting up. "I've just ordered another round."

With a drop of his eyes Williams muttered something inaudible, but on his face was a look of distaste. Clearly the acceptance of anything from Fenton was obnoxious.

"Aye," said Dave Mackinnon, draining his glass and also rising. "It's getting on for nine o'clock by my reckoning. Many thanks for your offer, Mr. Fenton, another time, maybe."

The other members were also pushing back their chairs, with murmured regrets.

"All right, Atta," Fenton told the steward-boy who had returned to the table with a bottle in each hand. "The gentlemen are all going home. Unless you'd care—" he turned to Stanley Bull, who had been a little slower to move than the rest.

"No, thanks, old boy, if you don't mind. It really is a bit late, you know. And tomorrow I want to be at Sobosso first thing to see what time the boys that end get on the job. Your bloke Fisher's been complaining about the road, you know. . . . Care for a lift home?"

"No, thanks, I'll walk. I need some fresh air."

He walked quickly away across the grass to the road, ignoring offers of lifts from those who had cars. For some moments the passing headlights made the road a lighted tunnel, but then the darkness closed down on him. Somewhere in the forest sounded the high-pitched, grating cry of a screech-owl, repeated several times with mounting intensity, as if in terror at some perceived onrush of peril. The solitary cries made the darkness seem empty, uninhabited, a black waste. They rose to a final pitch of hysteria and stopped in a kind of croak.

He was alone, but he always had been alone, a person apart, and he had not come out here in search of society. He would have preferred to be the only European in the station; he could ignore them all. When he entered the bungalow Nunoo began bringing in the plates and dishes for the evening meal. He arranged the table and drew back the chair with a professional dexterity which the house with its plain furniture and bare boards did not seem to deserve. In his starched white uniform buttoned up closely round his neck he imparted a tone that was out of place. He would manage a party splendidly. "Chop ready, sah," he announced and waited by the sideboard with his hands behind his back, stolidly indifferent, for Fenton to sit down.

## XI

THE change of night-watchman had gone through more easily than Davis expected. He had not had to practise any positive deception at all. Kwesi Amma had come along with an application for the vacancy and Davis had merely brought him into Fenton's office. That was neither more nor less than his duty as the office clerk. All he had done was to refrain from pointing out that the new watchman ought to be a Donga man for the sake of greater reliability. He might also have questioned the worth of Kwesi Amma's testimonial from the Nyankwa State Secretary. During those twelve years the only inhabitants of the palace had been a few decrepit old men and women and some goats which wandered in from time to time to nibble at the grass growing up in the inner courtyard. Any place less likely to be burgled could scarcely be imagined, everything of value having been removed to the regent's house several streets away, and it was doubtful if Kwesi Amma had gone without a single night's sleep during his whole time there. But Fenton had not even asked Davis for advice, thus relieving him of any necessity to commit himself one way or the other. He would admit no obligation to volunteer advice. He could imagine what Gerard or Hobden would have said if he had sought to suggest who should and who should not be employed. "Trying to fit your your friends in, eh? What did they give you—ten bob—a quid?" For them, the very fact of his advising against Kwesi Amma would have been sufficient reason for taking him on, except that Gerard and Hobden would never have looked at a Nyankwa

man for night-watchman. Certainly the yard had attractions for thieves. There were the petrol storage tanks, sometimes a few lorries left overnight, and the large reserve pile of linxite the other end, maintained against a temporary interruption in the supply of linxite from the mine. Davis had heard Gerard explaining to Fenton all about this pile. People from the town sometimes tried to pilfer it, believing that the raw unprocessed lumps had some kind of strengthening effect if mixed with the local clay for building houses. "Crazy, isn't it? But that's the sort of mentality you're up against in this country." They came at night with sacks. One of them had been caught a few months ago and imprisoned, and the nationalist Press in Kurakessie had raised a howl about "the sons of the soil being mercilessly deprived of the products of their own native land." The Nyankwa Progressive Youth Association had also passed a resolution of sympathy with the convicted man.

Davis had been born in Nyankwa twenty-four years ago and he had spent his childhood among the crowd of bare-footed boys in khaki shirts and shorts who ran after footballs in the town's open spaces and trooped off to school with small piles of books on their heads. His father, who had been killed by a hunter's stray bullet in the forest, he had scarcely known, though he remembered the nickel-plated coffin as it was wheeled on a hand-cart by a noisy crowd along the High Street. His mother, Effua Kyea, also dead, had been a shrewd, hard-faced woman who earned her living by baking bread, which the daughters head-loaded to market on large wooden platters and sold there, while the boys went off to school. Their small compound house had been deep in the maze of twisting alleys which formed the bulk of Nyankwa town, but its mud walls had long since been beaten to the ground by successive rainy seasons.

Effua Kyea had been a woman of independence. She could well have looked to her brother the Krontihene for a life of ease and comfort—there were dozens of far more distant relatives leading parasitic lives in his various houses. But she disliked being dependent even on her brother. So she went on baking bread in those low, dome-like ovens of red clay which covered a good half of the house's inner compound and she continued to bribe the junior officials of the Health Department who called in from time to time to say that her methods offended against some health regulation or other. She brought up her six children, sent the boys to the local school, and paid the funeral expenses of those that died from sickness. She accepted Yow Boma's offer to send Davis to Latuba College because, in a country of matrilineal descent, he was doing no more than his obvious duty in providing the best possible education for his eldest nephew; and if she had not died soon afterwards she would no doubt have looked kindly on the idea of Davis going to England. But she had not had much regard for white people since one of her daughters died in childbirth, a condition due to a brief interlude spent with one of the residents on the ridge. The man disappeared—transferred to another colony, retired to England, who could tell?—and the light-skinned infant had been taken charge of by the Krontihene, the burden of rearing illegitimate grandchildren being a little too much even for Effua Kyea's spirit of independence. With her hands still white—the day's baking had to be done whatever the family misfortunes—Davis remembered her declaring while the trolley waited to take away the coffin, "The foolish girl thought only of the white man's money. You shouldn't go outside your own people. The white men do not stay."

Until he was sixteen the close circle of habitation that was

Nyankwa had been his whole world. He had been brought up in his mother's confined compound among the ovens, he had slept on a mat on the earth floor with the other children, he had gone for water twice daily with a bucket on his head to the muddy and much trampled-in pool at the foot of a hill on the town's outskirts. He had taken a cutlass into the green stillness of the forest in search of firewood, but never alone for fear of the spirits which dwelt there. He had accompanied his mother into the fetish grove when she laid a pot of noxious ingredients for sacrifice at the base of the great tree which had grown out of the hole where the first Nyankwas had emerged. He had been the frequenter of many of the dingy, huddled houses in the town where numerous and more or less distant relatives of his mother and uncle lived.

Nyankwa was his town, they were his people, this unchanging wilderness of forest was his country. He could no more sever his ties with it than change the colour of his skin. Nyankwa would always be his and he would always be Nyankwa's. He hated the dirt, the smells, the ignorance, the constant talk about the fetish. It sickened him; an Old Latuban, to be mixed up in all this. But then from Hobden, that snappy, bad-tempered little man, or later from Gerard, would come some slighting reference which would stir his native loyalty to its depths. His mind would swing back to those well-worn excuses made by his fellow-members of the Progressive Youth Association at their fortnightly meetings. The people were not properly educated, they were being held back, it was all the fault of an alien government which had no regard for the true interests of those suffering, much-cited martyrs, 'the sons of the soil'. And when evening came he would wrap himself in a long native cloth of expensive texture and retire to the open-air compound of one of his friends; and there in the

glimmer of a hurricane lamp he would listen to the excited voices of Willie Essuman of the Trading Corporation and Kofi Siribuor, independent trader and most dynamic of the Association's members. These were his moments of greatest optimism, when he surrendered himself entirely to the knowledge that he was Yow Boma's nephew, sure of going off to England one day to qualify as a lawyer and returning as a man of consequence. They were his people, these chattering, but he was going much farther than ever they could hope to do.

But it was the music which above everything gave him a sense of unbreakable affinity with Nyankwa. The drums beckoned. Their insistent rhythm reached out from an immeasurable past and drew him irresistibly. They told of power, knowledge, determination which, like imprisoned forces, were struggling to burst out and find their true expression. There were few nights when the drums were not to be heard in some part of the town, at a funeral, wedding or open-air dance. They were the voice of his race which could not be gainsaid. They made him feel one of a great multitude whose emergence from the shadow of ages was at hand. The contorted, jerky movements of the dancers' bare limbs in the lamplight could fill him with disgust as the antics of savagery. But it was life, strong and vibrant. And there were moments when he could look up without envy towards the dark slopes of the ridge from which no sound came and which was inert and lifeless as an extinct planet.

The people he visited accepted him as one of themselves and he had been inclined to resent the ease with which they made this assumption in the days soon after his return from Latuba when he would go round the town in his college blazer. But for some time he had given up wearing the blazer,



with its crest of a flaming torch gripped in a stalwart hand, for it had become something of a hollow boast as the prospects of his going to England grew less and less immediate; and he only wore it now for visits to the ridge when he went up there to give Fenton language lessons, the ridge being an area where he felt he could appear in his rightful status, unexposed to taunts. But, when he was up there, sitting back in one of Fenton's arm-chairs much as if he were spending an hour with his tutor at Latuba College, he was conscious of being in a rarefied atmosphere from which he must soon return to his own native earth, where alone there was security. For his relatives would never in any circumstances abandon him. He could throw up his job, never do another stroke for the rest of his days, live in shameless idleness, but in the house of his uncle or of one of his mother's sisters he would always be provided with the necessities of life. Or he could commit any kind of crime and all the resources of his uncle and other relatives would be available to take his case to the highest possible court. Family obligations were absolute, but they were also mutual. He owed a duty of loyalty in return, the disowning of which meant going out into a great loneliness.

Before Fenton came to Nyankwa, it had not occurred to Davis that for him there could be any conflict of duty. Although he wanted to better himself, and rise above the unpleasant conditions of life in a primitive, overcrowded compound, yet however successful and prosperous he might become Nyankwa would always be his home, the place of his origin. But then Fenton had come and over this matter of the watchman conflict had arisen. If Gerard or Hobden had still been there he would not have felt any scruples over the purely negative part he had played. With neither of them would he have had that community of feeling which, with Fenton, made

him want to have behaved with the utmost possible candour. Hobden and Gerard were of a type well able to look after themselves, he had no sense of duty towards them. They put a certain, not very high, value on his services and in return he merely did what he was paid for, which did not include the gratuitous offer of advice. And if the interests of his uncle or of Nyankwa had clashed with the interests of the Sobosso Mining Company, so much the worse for the company. Davis would have been unhesitatingly on his uncle's and Nyankwa's side. But when the representative of the other side was a young man who had all the freedom from prejudice of a new arrival and who extended the hand of spontaneous friendship, the matter was complicated. He had been brought up against a scale of values which the college had always tried to instil in him, and on the acceptance of which he had prided himself as a person of superior education. But at the first test he had wavered.

He went up to the bungalow three times a week to give Fenton language lessons. He was keen to make up for his failure to be candid on the subject of Kwesi Amma. It was Fenton who had asked whether he would be willing to do this service and very readily he had agreed. After the lessons they talked, but Davis, from a sense of caution, seldom chose the subjects, nor was he always very responsive in answer to the questions. He could not be sure that Fenton would not report anything he said to his white friends. He knew, of course, how Fenton was regarded at the club, having learned this from Atta the club steward, who, as a brother of Kwesi Amma, was often to be seen in the Krontihene's compound.

"They say he no good . . . they say they no think he fit do the work proper . . . they say he like Africans too much. . . . Eh! These people! Why do they talk so? They say he fear

for live in Mistah Hobden's bungalow and it be good if he go to 'Englan' quick quick."

Davis had long since ceased to be surprised by Europeans' freedom of conversation before their servants. This had been very noticeable at the college, where the steward-boys from the masters' common-room were always willing for a shilling or so to narrate to any enquiring pupil what the staff were saying about him at any particular time.

"It be so they go talk," Atta would continue. "I think they no like his palaver. At all."

It was not therefore certain that Fenton would repeat at the club everything of interest that Davis told him. But Davis still had to be careful. In some circumstances Fenton might feel it his duty. They would all keep together in the last resort. People of the same colour were bound to. Davis was quite willing to explain the duties of the chief, how he was elected, marriage customs, and so on. But in reply to questions about the fetish village he was more reticent.

"The priests live there in order not to be contaminated," he said, thinking uneasily of Komfo Kabachi's nocturnal visits. "It is custom, sir, that's all. Our people still have great faith in the fetish. They have not yet had a proper education in these matters."

"Is there still human sacrifice?"

"Oh no, sir, not at all, sir. Those days are all past."

He controlled an impulse to add that they were not savages. As a member of the Progressive Youth Association he moved instinctively to his country's defence. Rumours of dark events did sometimes circulate—a Donga man or some other stranger was supposed to be missing or something—but if you believed every rumour you would have to believe that women had given birth to snakes, that goats had been born with ten legs,

and that fire-breathing demons had been seen in the forest.

Fenton, noting the resentment in his eyes, passed to another subject, with much the same sense of frustration that he had had when questioning Nunoo. Davis was glad that he had controlled his temper, otherwise there might have been an end to these very pleasant meetings. He enjoyed being up here in these spacious, well-ordered surroundings. It was the sort of life which was his due and which he would one day realise. And Fenton liked him. There was no other explanation of the warm greeting and unaffected manner, the open, ready smile. Davis was flattered. He was confirmed in his sense of fitness for higher things.

Fenton asked him one day about the Progressive Youth Association.

"It is just some few young men in town, sir."

"But what do you do exactly?"

"We hold meetings every two weeks. Our discussions are very interesting."

"What do you talk about?"

"Many things, sir. Last month we passed a resolution to say that the Government should make some improvements in the town. It has neglected Nyankwa for too long altogether. There are not enough latrines and so the streets are not clean at all."

He went on to say that a committee appointed by the Association to interview the Sanitary Superintendent on this matter had been told that the existing latrines were not fully used; there had been a remark that the people were lazy; whereupon the Association had sent an account of the interview to the *Kurakessie Times*, which had printed it in such a manner as to provoke the threat of a libel action from Williams, the Sanitary Superintendent concerned. The *Kura-*

*Kessie Times* had had to publish an apology in three consecutive issues. It had been a very unfortunate affair all round.

"We should be very pleased, sir, if you would attend our next meeting."

"Really?"

Fenton was leaning forward, his face eager.

"Yes, sir. On Friday next week. I will send you a formal invitation."

"I shall look forward to it."

"Thank you, sir."

## XII

HE stood where he had stood with Gerard the first morning, facing the dense tangle of high bush which marked the limit of the Sobosso Mining Company's rail-side property. Behind him all was quiet. The labourers had left for the day and the wagons, each piled to a pyramid with its earthy contents, waited for the midnight train. Just to his left was the big mound of linxite which was supposed to be such a temptation to prospective house-builders in town, and between it and the barrier of foliage was a narrow path which went curving into the recesses of the forest. It was the path to the fetish grove, the way used by the priests from the concealed village in the trees the other side of the line.

Fenton had ascertained from Davis that there was no objection to his exploring the path.

"You're sure the priests wouldn't mind?"

"Oh, no, sir, not at all, sir."

"I thought it was—well, sort of sacred."

"Yes, sir. Some of our people are still very suspicious."

"Do you ever go there yourself?"

"Oh no, sir." The tone was sharply protesting. "I have no belief in such things. It is all superstition."

"Anyway, no one will mind if I go and have a look?"

"No, sir. But it is not very interesting."

He had walked down from the bungalow after tea, fully intent on seeing something which had been exciting his

curiosity for weeks. But for a moment he hesitated. The sun in its blue setting shone obliquely into the yard, and the stationary wagons and the forest's silent contemplation of the single-track railway in its midst were as if the world was at a standstill. Braima Donga's iron rail hung from its wire, mute and solitary. Fenton, after examining the reserve pile of linxite and satisfying himself that under Kwesi Amma there had been no depredations, stepped on to the path.

It was like going underground. The path led gradually downwards beneath the arching trees. The air had a crypt-like chill and there was a smell of damp decay from vegetation which the sun had never warmed. Out of the riot of weeds and bush the trees rose up smooth and sheer. Creepers coiled and looped themselves along the branches, their loose ends hanging down like ropes. Some leaves edged with gold in the high over-reaching canopy alone testified to the external sunlit scene.

He emerged into a circle some fifty yards in diameter where the grass was cut and the undergrowth cleared, but confronting him from the base of a tree in the centre and staring with huge disc-like eyes was a stone figure in the form of a bear sitting upright with forepaws raised. The stare was blank yet startling, like the dilated eyes of a maniac. The figure was about six feet high and was placed between two of the buttresses which had grown out from the tree. On the ground near it were a number of black earthenware pots, some of them inverted.

The eyes stared inexorably, focused on nothing, but they checked Fenton from advancing at once into the clearing. He looked round, half expecting someone to appear and challenge his right to be there. But the god, fetish, or whatever it was, could no doubt look after itself without human aid. No one

would wish to draw upon himself the power which animated that unwavering, wide-eyed stare. The figure had been there year after year, longer than living memory. Where had it come from? Who made it? How did it get there? Did anyone now know, even its votaries in the village across the line?

Fenton went forward into the clearing. Here was the visible centre of local mysticism. Here in the tree lived the spirit of the Nyankwa people. Here, Davis had told him in words which showed that he wished to scorn the whole business, came litigants: barren women, schoolboys who wished to pass examinations, and farmers who were experiencing a blight on their crops. They came at appointed times when there was a fetish priest in attendance to advise what sacrifices should be offered. Ten or fifteen years ago, said Davis, the fame of the Nyankwa fetish was countrywide, and people would come great distances to seek its assistance. The priests had run a very profitable business in sacrificial sheep and poultry. At the end of one of the big days there would be a whole four-gallon tin full of two-shilling pieces. The Nyankwa fetish, like Nyankwa itself, had since gone down in general esteem. But that did not alter the fact that the spirit of Nyankwa lived here and must be propitiated before the people of Nyankwa could succeed in their various affairs.

And this was all it was. A goggle-eyed monstrosity of crude workmanship and a few pots containing dried grass, leaves, twigs and other ingredients better left unexamined; while a swarm of ants crawled blackly over the grey base of the tree. Fenton walked round the clearing, but there was nothing else. After the first shock it was difficult to take the thing very seriously. A belief needed dignity to be respected.



Fenton, looking more carefully, was not at all sure that the staring figure was not a little lop-sided. Suppose that one day the rain washed the soil away and it toppled over. That, no doubt, would portend a most fearful calamity and there would be a general exodus from the town.

Slowly he went back along the path. He had been trying to get to the bottom of things. Knowledge of the language would tell him what was being said around him, he was friendly with Davis, next week he was meeting the Progressive Youth Association, and the other day Davis had introduced him to his uncle, the Krontihene. But he now began to wonder whether at the end of it all he would find anything more substantial than a few twigs in a cracked cooking-pot; whether the reasons for the supposed potency of such things were reasons with which one could have very much patience. It was all so squalid and cheap. The grandeur of the forest and the sunlit colours outside were worthy of something better. He remembered the grace and natural movement of Braima Donga's granddaughter as she raised her arms and lifted down from her head the enamel bowl. That and the fetish ought not to be in the same scheme of life.

"Good evening," said the voice of Rita Van Huyt. "You're looking very thoughtful."

She was standing with a walking-stick near the end wagon and had been screened from his view by the mound of linxite until he turned into the yard.

"I didn't expect to see you here," he said, returning her smile. "You didn't come on the sly for a bag of linxite, did you?"

"I've been taking a walk along the railway line. The walks in Nyankwa are so attractive, aren't they? Along the line towards Kɔrakessie. Or along the line towards Latuba. Or along the roads to Sobosso and Adantakrom. Straight out

and straight back. I've never thought of exploring your funny little path. Where does it go?"

With her back to the iron buffer of the railway wagon she made an anomalous figure in her red-belted, white cotton frock. Her stockingless feet were in white sandals. He had not seen her since that evening at the club. Despite her ready smile her face was pallid and tired. The plain gold ring scintillating on her right hand caught his attention. Her mother's, he presumed.

"It leads down to the fetish," he replied. "The famous Nyankwa fetish. I've been having a look at it."

She glanced at him as they walked along the yard.

"You take an interest in these things, don't you? They leave me cold. What good does it do you?"

"I don't know about 'good'. I just want to know what goes on. It—well, it doesn't seem right to live here and know absolutely nothing. Besides, it's an occupation."

"So that's the linxite yard." She paused as they reached the road and stood looking down, half leaning on her stick, the other hand on her hip. Fenton had the fantastic notion that she was standing on the top of an English hill, clad in a tweed skirt, her hair ruffled, and looking out over a landscape of woods, cornfields and country lanes. It was a throw-back, he assumed, to some shiny-papered advertisement he had once seen for ladies' tailoring or stout walking-shoes. An extravagant throw-back, too, considering that they were standing not twenty feet above the level of the yard and that the central features were his shack of an office and a score of goods wagons. Certainly her hair was not ruffled. It hung down behind her neck, a little limp. But her eyes, whose just perceptible slant always made her expression slightly enigmatic, might well have been looking at distances

considerably farther than the trees the other side of the line.

"Do you like it here?" she asked as they took the road past the station and the Guinea Bank. "I asked you that when you came to the club, but then it was just for something to say. Do you really like Nyankwa?"

"Yes," he said, putting out of his head the grotesqueness in the fetish grove. "I do like it here. I've got a good job. And I like the people. They're a friendly lot," and he thought of the smiling welcome which he had received from the people in the Krontihene's compound when Davis had invited him in there, a welcome which, it had seemed to him, wonderfully transcended the squalor of their conditions. He had been flattered by that invitation. The Krontihene had seemed genuinely pleased to meet him. They had had a glass of beer together.

He was prepared for Rita to follow his words with one of those ruthless remarks which he had heard her discharge in the club like arrows from an inexhaustible quiver. But for the time being she had laid her part aside. She did not appear to feel the need just then for putting on a show. Her expression was less vital, as if she had permitted herself to relax, and the slow walk, with the deliberate placing of the walking-stick at every step, was of one taking time off for consideration. It put him on terms with her to feel that, meeting him, she had not thought it necessary to adopt her customary role. His sense of being in some way privileged in this respect led him to wonder, with quickly rising sympathy, what sort of life it was that she led in Van Huyt's house and how long it could continue. Her situation was impossible and it beat the imagination to see how she could stand it for a day. Fenton, seeing the sun just above the irregular tops of the trees in its most magnificent stage of red-gold and the opposing sweep of

the residential area full in the final glow, was nearly carried away into an indignant expression of his sympathy. But he would be a clumsy intruder. They were no more than strangers.

"Why did you come here?" she said. "What brought you?"

"I wanted the job. It had more to it than the one I had at the time. So I took it."

"No other reason?"

"None at all. I just thought I should like it here. And I do."

"When you arrived I believe you didn't know anything about——"

"Hobden? No. Didn't have a clue. I learnt it all on the doorstep. It set me back a bit."

He might have been playing a part himself now. His voice was deliberately cheerful.

"And if you had known, would you have come?"

"I don't know. I was pretty mad when I discovered it. I thought I'd been tricked, got here under false pretences. But I think I would have come. There was nothing to keep me in England. And I've nothing," he added with sudden candour, "to go back to."

"But if you had you would, wouldn't you?"

"Not now. I tell you I like it here. . . . Look at those colours, there on the ridge. Aren't they wonderful?"

"My goodness," she laughed in her old manner. "Don't get romantic over Nyankwa. The place won't stand it. It really won't. You'll find out for yourself when you've been here longer."

They turned into the road which led under the flamboyants up towards the ridge. Behind them, continuing towards the town, was a strung-out line of barefooted women in their long,

loosely-wrapped dresses, carrying head-loads of plantains, yams and oranges from their farms for sale in the next day's market. Without moving their heads they shouted raucously to each other up and down the line, and the sound of their voices followed Fenton and the girl up the hill.

"I hate this country," she said quietly. "God alone knows how I hate it. I would anyhow, I think. It's ugly, because it never changes. You never see a leaf turn. You never see the new buds. You talk about the colours, but they're always the same colours, lurid and lifeless. And it corrupts. It drags one down into the gutter, leads one on to things one would never normally dream of. I'm not speaking of—a particular case. It happens to everybody, one way or another. Do you really think you can escape?"

He kept looking straight up the road at the sprays of scarlet flowers in the trees before him. He cast about for words in Nyankwa's defence, but then he thought of the madly staring figure he had just left, the ants on the base of the tree, the absurd pots, and wondered whether after all Nyankwa was worth the trouble of defending. But if Nyankwa was a wash-out. . . . He had to have something worth while to hold on to. He could not imagine himself living here, as others did, with no interests outside the club and the golf-course.

The distance to his bungalow lessened.

"Do you expect to stay much longer?" he asked.

"Until my father goes."

"I hope you get away soon," he said, turning to look at her.

"You seem to have had about enough."

She let this pass and asked:

"Is this linxite as valuable as people say?"

"I believe so. It halves building costs and halves the time

of construction. We could sell many times our present production."

"I know I'm being outrageously inquisitive but—is your company sound—financially, I mean?"

She turned her face full upon him.

"Yes, so far as I know. Why do you ask?"

"Father hopes to buy you up, that's all. So you can see he's not thinking of leaving just yet."

"But what do you mean—buy us up? How can he?"

"I don't understand these things. But he'll never leave while he thinks there's a chance. . . . This is your place, isn't it?"

They halted in the road by the entrance to the bungalow.

"Tell me," she said, looking straight at him. "You'll think me quite mad, but there's one more thing I want to ask you. Have you any connection with the police?"

The question took him completely aback.

"Police? Good heavens, no! Anything but! Whatever makes you think that?"

Her face in its frame of dark hair was flushed.

"I'm sorry," she said, lowering her eyes. "I just thought—coming into this bungalow, keeping on Nunoo, prying about in the town——"

"Well," he laughed. "I'd no idea I was such a suspicious character. Does anyone else think that?"

"Of course they don't. It was just one of my more than usually scatter-brained ideas."

She was smiling back at him naturally now, her eyes were frank and clear as he had not yet seen them. But in a moment she was serious again.

"Will you promise me something?"

"What's coming now?"

"Something you'll think just as crazy, I'm afraid. I want you to promise me that if you find anything out you'll tell me first."

"If I find anything out? But what do you expect me to find out? Something about the mine and—your father?"

"That, of course. But about anything else too." She looked down, prodding the ground with her walking-stick. "Anything that—that you'd think I might be interested to know," and again she looked up at him, this time with such a deep appeal that he could question her no further.

"O.K. But I'm really not a detective, you know."

She did not return his smile. Instead her eyes left him and hardened suddenly at something above and behind him. Quickly he faced towards the bungalow, in time to see Nunoo slip away from one of the open windows.

"I suppose you, too, think I'm letting down the side," he said.

Reddening, she ignored the words.

"I'd better be getting home. . . . Thanks for the promise."

"Won't you come in for a minute?"

Vigorously she shook her head.

"Oh, I couldn't. I really must be getting along. We're going down to take a drink off Dave Mackinnon." She gave an uneasy laugh. "Away from the club for once."

She walked up the road and he stood looking at the white, red-belted figure. Her dress, a little long, swung with an easy movement to steps which were still unhurried. Again his imagination worked and he saw her walking up an English country lane. With her stick she filled the part completely. For him English lanes had always belonged to the unobtainable to be glimpsed in occasional excursions from school or from an army bus going on some exercise or other. They were

part of a world to which sooner or later she would be returning, while he had cast in his lot with Nyankwa. That was all there was for him to do, after failing to make anything of himself elsewhere. But the sight of her walking up the road and the associations which it suggested induced in him a vague sense of loss.



## XIII

THE work in the yard was about to be crippled by a shortage of spades. It was one of those unpredictable shortages which would strike the colony from time to time. It might be drawing-pins, balls of string, wheelbarrows or one of a hundred other prosaic commodities. One would discover without warning that there were none in the country. In this case it was spades.

Hoskice explained the matter.

"The shortage is quite general, I assure you. There is a dock strike in the U.K. We have had no shipments for several weeks. Next month, perhaps. . . . How many shall I reserve for you?"

His white shirt and pressed khaki shorts had a starchy newness. His cool, calm detachment tempted Fenton to suspect that if the Amalgamated African Trading Corporation were in need of spades they could get them easily enough.

"But without spades we can't carry on. I need them immediately." Some of the labourers had complained that morning about their spades and a general inspection had shown that about fifty were half worn away. It was a distinct threat to the expeditious loading of the wagons.

"I regret there is nothing I can advise," Hoskice added. "The situation is due to factors quite outside my company's control."

With the Syrian traders in the town Fenton fared no better. Smilingly they declared their readiness to place their whole stocks at the disposal of the Sobosso Mining Company. "But spades, Mr. Fenton," they said, shaking their greasy heads,

"spades very difficult at this time. No spades anywhere just now, I think."

Fenton put through a call to Shorcliff. The line buzzed and crackled, obliterating two words out of three.

"Pails? . . . Fire or something?"

"Not pails. Spades, Shovels."

Somewhere on the line there was a violence of atmospherics, in the midst of which Shorcliff was shouting incoherently.

"I can't hear you. I say I want five dozen spades, shovels, immediately. Put them on the next train, can you?"

Shorcliff's voice came at him with booming clarity.

"Now, now, take it easy. Where do you think I keep 'em? Under me bed? Sorry, chum, can't do it. Not a shovel in the place. Couldn't get one to bury me own mother."

Sweating, Fenton put the receiver down. He was annoyed that he had not discovered the condition of the spades sooner, that his predecessors had not laid in a stock, that he couldn't hit on a way of remedying the matter. There must be spades somewhere, but he could not get at them. He did not know the ropes. It was one of those matters which could be settled in five minutes over a drink with the right man.

During the afternoon Fisher called in.

"Damned hot down here," he said, taking off his leather jacket. "Up at the mine we live in a mist till ten in the morning. You'd better come up some time and have a look round. . . . Spades? Scarce, are they? Well, you ought to be able to rumble a few."

This, of course, was the man who had 'rumbled' pretty well everything from lorries to Nissen huts. He fired off a few questions on other matters and was on his way out again. Wouldn't come up for a cup of tea.

"Thermos in the car, thanks. One or two things to fix up

in the town and then," he concluded with a bracing smile, "back on the job."

Fenton called Davis.

"There must be someone who's got spades. Don't you know?"

The chocolate-smooth face above the bow-tie broadened into a smile.

"Yes, sir. You may please ask Mr. Asbestos."

"Asbestos? Does he sell spades?"

"Please, I can't tell. But I do remember that in the time of Mr. Hobden when the roof was leaking he supplied us some iron sheets."

"So you think he'll have spades also?"

"I should think so."

The interior of Mr. Asbestos's store left little doubt that he could not possibly depend for his living on things sold across the counter. The visible stock consisted of a line of patent medicines ranged on one of the shelves at the back of the store, a few dozen dusty bottles of minerals on another shelf, and two bulky sacks against the wall in a corner. Mr. Asbestos was thin and sallow-faced, youngish, with a broad and slanting forehead. His large eyes were never still, giving quick, nervous glances. Fenton had heard at the club some story about Asbestos being down and out some years ago and being put on his feet again by Van Huyt.

He greeted Fenton warmly and invited him to sit down at his desk behind the counter. He held out a tin of cigarettes and when Fenton took one he struck a match and cupped his hand round the flame with long-practised agility. But when Fenton mentioned spades he waved his hand towards the patent medicine bottles in implied invitation to search the whole store.

"Look, Mr. Fenton," he said with a confidential air, after a quick look round. "I will tell you how it is. Mr. Hoskice, he is my good friend, but his company get the monopoly, you understand? The Syrian and African traders they buy all their stock from Mr. Hoskice, so if he get no spades everybody get no spades. For me I get this small contract with your company and this new chief perhaps he give me some small timber concession. If not so . . ."

He shrugged hopelessly.

"Suppose you wanted spades yourself, where would you go?"

"Ah, Mr. Fenton, I would help you if I could, but you see how it is. This country very difficult sometimes, don't you think?"

Fenton got up. The colourless contents of the patent medicine bottles caught his eye. Gripe Water, Stomach Powder, Female Pills. An African youth in frayed shorts was beginning to sweep out the store.

"Mr. Fenton," said the proprietor suddenly. "Excuse me to say, have you enquired from Mr. Van Huyt?"

He went on to explain, still with a closely confidential air and with quick glances to ensure that he was not being overheard, that Van Huyt had a large shed half a mile out along the Sobosso road where he had stored all his equipment when he closed down his gold-mine. Mr. Asbestos had assisted with transportation. He distinctly remembered a number of spades.

"I do not want to interfere with Mr. Van Huyt's business, you understand? So perhaps you don't tell him you hear this from me. Perhaps he sell them already, I don't know. I just give you—how you call it?—the tip-off."

No immediate approach to Van Huyt was possible because this was one of the afternoons he played golf. Fenton could see the two of them, Van Huyt and Mackinnon, out on the

golf-course as he returned to the bungalow. So he had a night to consider how he could best solicit spades from the man who was supposed to be after the mine. In the morning he would go up to the house, which he had not yet seen. Rita would be there also. Yesterday she had sent him some cuttings for his garden, with Salifu, the green-fingered garden-boy, to put them in. He had written her a note to thank her. 'Dear Miss Van Huyt . . .' It had seemed very formal. His desire to thank her in person might be made the ostensible reason for his visit, and then if Van Huyt appeared he could mention casually the matter of spades. He was not going to throw himself at the man's feet.

The house which Van Huyt had built stood on a flat piece of ground behind the grey-shuttered bungalow formerly occupied by the District Commissioner, and it faced in the opposite direction towards the untouched tracts of forest. It consisted of two storeys in white stone which creepers had since partially obscured. The drive led up to it between hedges of purple and scarlet bougainvillæa, and before the front of the house was a wide sweep of lawn edged with trees, beyond which the ground fell away into the forest-covered valley. A white garden-seat overlooking this wilderness was placed beneath one of the trees. The flower-beds to the right and left of the lawn and by the walls of the house had a gaudy brilliance like the coloured illustrations in a seed catalogue. Across the lawn two bare-legged garden-boys were dragging a roller.

Rita caught sight of him through the ground-floor windows and was at the door to meet him.

"Hallo! Do you want to see Father?"

"I do, as a matter of fact. And thanks for the cuttings."

She laughed.

"Oh, that! Let me know if you want any more. Come in out of the sun and I'll tell him you're here."

He waited in the hall, wiping his face, while she went across to a door.

"Through there," she said when she came back, "and when you've finished come and join me in a cup of tea in the lounge."

The room where Van Huyt received him ran the whole width of the house and there were tall open windows round all three sides with green slotted blinds dropped a third of the way down to keep out the glare. Van Huyt was sitting at a desk. An electric fan whirled above him.

"Well, well, Mr. Fenton, this is a pleasant surprise. Come and sit down."

His fleshy lips curled. By daylight his face appeared still more rugged and lined.

"And how's the great work proceeding? Production soaring? Everything in the garden rosy?"

"We're doing all right. But there's a small matter, Mr. Van Huyt, in which I was wondering whether you could help us out."

Van Huyt's eyebrows rose.

"We're short of spades. There don't seem to be any here or in Latuba. We want about five dozen. Can you help us?"

There was a widening grin.

"Spades? You mean the Sobosso Mining Company is held up for want of a few spades?"

"Not held up, exactly. But some of the labourers' spades in the yard are worn out and I can't get replacements. Not just now, anyway. If you have any, I'd be grateful if you'd let us have some."

In his khaki shirt and shorts—he had resolved not to dress

himself up—he felt like a tramp in the big room with its green-carpeted floor and chairs and desk of pale, cream-coloured wood. From the garden sounded the faint clanking of the roller.

Van Huyt laughed.

“Hasn’t it occurred to you how ridiculous it is that a company like yours with a whole mountain of linxite under its feet should have to go round begging for—how many was it?—five dozen spades?”

“Possibly,” Fenton replied, attempting a smile. “But I just want to know whether you’re willing to supply them. If so, with your permission, I’ll have them collected right away. We’ve got one or two lorries—as you may know.”

The look of bantering amusement disappeared and Fenton found himself under a steady scrutiny.

“You’re wasting your time. Not only you, but the whole of your precious company. What’s the good of spades, lorries or anything else when in about four months’ time that road of yours up the hillside will be washed away by the rains? Eh?”

Fenton forced himself to meet Van Huyt’s eyes.

“They never told you, I suppose, that in the last wet season your lorry-drivers nearly went on strike and had to be paid danger-money to carry on. Next time you’ll have to pay their funeral expenses as well, I should think, if the police don’t close the road first. I know that area. Been all over it. Pitched my tent on the very spot where Fisher now has his Nissen hut. It was forest then and I didn’t know I was squatting on millions of tons of linxite. More fool me. But I know that country. To run heavy lorries up and down that road in the rains is just plain lunacy. What you need is a railway out to Sobosso and an overhead cable to the top of the hill. Bring the stuff down that way. But to go playing around with lorries

and shovels—it's archaic. You don't deserve to be in the business at all."

He paused, but Fenton still did not speak.

"Your Mr. Cassap in London is now running round in small circles looking for a bit of capital to patch up the road. It's an expensive business, shoring up mountains."

"I should think linxite would be considered a fairly safe investment by most people."

"Normally it would be. But there's another thing you don't know. The syndicate of which your company is an offshoot has a bad reputation in the money market. You don't remember the Bipiassi gold-mine. When that closed down they could scarcely pay their labour. There were—all sorts of things. None of the European employees could get a job in this colony afterwards for months. The result is the Government won't let the Sobosso Mining Company take a long lease until it's proved itself. And of course until it's got a long lease no one will put any money into it."

"One wonders how we got started at all."

Van Huyt shrugged.

"One can generally manage to start these things. A newspaper build-up. Trumpet-blowing in the right quarters. Enthusiastic shareholders scraping the barrel. Cassap can be pretty glib when he wants. But now? You'll have to close down in six months." He grinned. "I met Fisher in the bank the other day and asked him whether he was buying a helicopter to evacuate himself when the rains come. He won't get down by road without a broken neck."

"And when are you stepping in yourself?" Fenton asked. It was a question which would probably cost him the spades but his irritation could no longer be restrained.

"When I can get full control, as they very well know. We



could never work together. They've got such small minds. What are you producing a year? A hundred thousand tons? It ought to be five times that amount. And you ought to be building some houses for the people here. Heaven knows they need them."

"The linxite's no good until it's been processed."

"Of course it isn't. Process it here, then! Build a factory here! There's no difficulty. They'll compel you to do it anyway when they get self-government. Do it themselves, more likely. You people want to look ahead."

He paused again before continuing in a quieter tone:

"I don't know how you got mixed up in all this. You've only just arrived. What they told you or what they didn't tell you I don't know. But you ought to get out, before it's too late. I've seen companies out here go bust before. Salaries aren't paid, there's no money for passages home."

For some moments he studied Fenton's colouring face.

"There's that brick and tile works of mine up the road. I've no time to manage it properly myself. Care to take charge?"

Van Huyt sat half-turned in his chair, stolid and massive, his eyebrows raised invitingly. Behind him through the windows were the green spread of lawn and the hot-house brilliance of red and yellow flowers all perfectly still. The garden and the room in which Fenton sat were eloquent of success and security. But Van Huyt would not live here for ever; one day, surely, he would have had enough of this country, and then he might well want someone here to look after his interests, especially if he got the linxite mine.

Fenton suppressed these speculations and looked again at the face on which thirty years of West African life were heavily ingrained.

"I haven't come here for employment," he said, "and anyway

if you or we or anybody else starts building houses of linxite here there won't be much future in bricks and tiles. Can you let me have the spades?"

He was in the mood of not caring whether he got any spades out of Van Huyt or not. But Van Huyt only chuckled and taking up his pen began to write quickly.

"You'll need more than spades before you're through. Take this to my watchman. He'll give you what you want. And remember this, Mr. Fenton. Misplaced loyalty is foolish. And wasteful. People ought to realise that."

"Satisfactory?" asked Rita when Fenton went into the lounge across the hall. "Did you get what you want? You look as if—as if you'd had a set-to."

Fenton seated himself and relaxed under the draught from the fan. Everything in the room—the pale blue cushion-covers, the light transparent hangings half-drawn across the windows, the general sense of well-established comfort—seemed as little part of Nyankwa as Rita herself.

"He's let me have the spades I wanted. And then he offered me a job."

"A job?"

"He said the Sobosso Mining Company was about to go broke. Advised me to quit." He took a deep breath. "I feel as if I'd been tempted. Colossally tempted. It's ridiculous, of course. But, well . . . 'if falling down you will adore me' . . . it was something like that." He began getting up. "I think I'd better be going."

"Have a cup of tea first. He won't be coming in here yet. You can shake our dust from your feet afterwards. Or would you rather have a glass of beer? You certainly look as if you needed something."

"You know, I really think I would." He resettled himself.

"An experience like that . . . I feel completely drained."

She called the steward-boy and there was silence while the beer was being produced.

"But why?" he exclaimed when they were alone again. "Why offer me a job? Why should he? Does he really want someone to manage his brick and tile works?"

"It wasn't because he liked your face, if that's what you think," said Rita dryly. "He doesn't offer jobs even to handsome young men for sentimental reasons."

"Oh, thank you! Why then?"

"It can only be because he wants to cause your company all possible embarrassment. It would embarrass them, I suppose, if they lost you?"

"In a small way, possibly. They'd have to look round for somebody else. But why did he give me the spades? Out of contempt, I suppose . . . How much do you really know?" he asked presently.

She looked at him intently.

"I don't know very much. Just something of his methods."

"And his objects? Why does he want the mine? It can't be for money. And doesn't he ever want to retire?"

She drank some tea and replaced the cup slowly on the table beside her.

"He will make money out of it, naturally, But that isn't his main reason. What he wants is to build cheap houses for the people here. With linxite." She raised her eyes at him.

"You mean—social welfare and all that? That's a bit sentimental, isn't it?"

"He's got a sentimental streak where Africans are concerned. And by that I don't mean what you probably think I mean. He wants to improve their conditions. He wants to put up cheap housing estates all over the country. He says," she con-

tinued, not without bitterness, "that he's lived in native compounds so much himself that he can appreciate the need."

It took Fenton some moments to reassess Van Huyt in the light of these remarks.

"He keeps all this pretty much to himself, doesn't he?"

"Well, it probably doesn't suit his plans to broadcast them from the house-tops. Not just now, anyway. He discusses them with Dave Mackinnon, I believe. Dave says the proposition's not economic and tries to dissuade him. I wish to God he'd succeed! But you see what I'm up against. For him it's a matter of conscience. He's made so much money out of this country that he wants to leave it better than he found it. He likes Nyankwa, you see, just as you do. That's why he stays. Apart from any other reason."

The last words were added as an afterthought and when she had spoken she coloured slightly and lowered her eyes. Again Fenton saw the whole hopeless burden of her position, but this time she made no immediate effort at recovery. He wanted to help her. She no longer appeared as someone able to look after herself. He wanted to go up to her. "Come out of all this," was what he wanted to say.

"You ought to leave him to it," he exclaimed at last. "Why don't you?" He remembered what Van Huyt himself had said about misplaced loyalty. "You're wasting your life."

She shook her head.

"I can't. You don't know what you're saying."

She moved her hands so that he caught sight of the ring on her right hand and at once he regretted his outburst. Obviously he could not know what he was saying, he, Philip Fenton whose very name was the product of official inventiveness and whose whole childhood had been spent in philanthropic institutions. He began to redden and perspire. To be

offering her advice was sheer presumption. His place was in the yard among the labourers doing the job for which he was paid. In coming into this lounge he had stepped out of his proper sphere.

"I must be getting back," he said, rising. She sighed and got up too. Both felt that there was no point in prolonging the discussion.

"I've been meaning to ask you," she began as she went with him into the hall, "whether you'd care to come to dinner here next Friday. There'll be the usual crowd. Dave Mackinnon, Stanley Bull and so on."

"Next Friday? I can't, I'm afraid."

She frowned.

"Of course, I can imagine your being so disgusted with us that——"

"It's not that, at all. I've got another engagement."

"For next Friday? Are you sure? I thought I'd made certain that there was nothing else on."

"I really have got another engagement. I've promised to go to a meeting of the Progressive Youth Association."

She looked amused.

"Whatever's that?"

"They're a collection of young men in town. That's about all I know. They've sent me an invitation. I shouldn't like to let them down."

"I remember now. Aren't they the lot Dai Williams had a row with?"

"I dare say. He has a row with most people, doesn't he?" He caught her eye. "I beg your pardon, I shouldn't have said that."

She gave a smiling shrug. He found it quite impossible to tell how that particular affair was going.

"Poor Dail!" she said simply. "But surely you're not getting mixed up with them, are you? They're the local branch of agitators, aren't they?"

He disregarded this.

"Oh, well," she added. "If the meeting is so important . . . You do like your Nyankwa, don't you?"

"Yes. It's all I've got. Thanks for the drink." \*

## XIV

IT had been the height of foolishness to suppose that with Rita Van Huyt he could pass even slightly beyond the limits of the ordinary social formalities. In Nyankwa the common bond between the handful of Europeans was a white skin and this enabled a man like Van Huyt to sit at the same table and have drinks with inspectors of works, sanitary superintendents and obscure employees of the Sobosso Mining Company. Social distinctions were concealed, but to act as if they did not exist landed one in a false position. Fenton had spoken to her from the heart and had immediately realised that he had gone beyond bounds. In no other setting would she have regarded him for a moment. She could be friendly on the off-chance of getting information to strengthen her hand against her father's designs on the linxite mine and she could feel slighted when he accepted an invitation from the Progressive Youth Association in preference to her own. But she would not give him another thought when once she achieved her object, if ever she did, in getting her father away. Besides, she hated the country. He merely bored her with his complimentary references to it.

Another of his acquaintances was anxious to get away from Nyankwa. Of Davis's aspirations he learned during those afternoon conversations at the bungalow. Davis, leaning back comfortably, his bare black knees below his white shorts thrown one across the other, told him that he considered Nyankwa to be an uncivilised place with no prospects whatever. It was, he said, a stagnant backwater. Fenton listened

with a vague sense of disappointment. It always hurt him to hear Nyankwa depreciated.

"Anyway, I hope you won't be leaving us just yet. We can't afford to lose you."

Davis explained that he was trying to save forty pounds—he gave Fenton a searching look whose meaning was obvious—for the third-class fare to England. There he would find work and study law in his spare time. An Old Latuban had done it that way. It had taken him eight years. He had given the college a talk on his experiences when he returned.

There was a short silence. Fenton hoped he was not going to be asked outright for a loan, because he hadn't got the money and he knew Davis would not believe him.

"But I've always thought," Fenton put in, "that your uncle was going to send you."

With a slow shake of his head Davis smiled ruefully.

"My uncle does not have a very good understanding of these matters."

"Has he changed his mind?"

"He keeps saying I must wait. But I think he has spent all his money paying the stool debts. Please, sir, do you think I could find work in England?"

"Not very easily."

"Many of our West African boys have gone as stowaways and I hear the British Government pays them money until they find work. Is it true?"

"It may be. I suppose they qualify for some form of assistance. But you're not thinking of going as a stowaway, are you?"

"I am determined to begin my studies in England this year. It is really very essential. Life here is too tedious."

The smile was gone, wiped off, and his face was set with a



look of sulky resentment. His eyes rolled broodingly. It may have been due to disappointment that Fenton had not immediately offered financial help. But it betrayed a lack of refinement, a reversion to type, which Fenton wished he had not seen.

"There is going to be a bust-up," said Davis quietly.

The words were out. The fears and suspicions which had been simmering for weeks had at last found an outlet. But at once he regretted the remark. It could only provoke questions for which he was unprepared. He observed Fenton's quickened interest and sought for ways and means to cover up what he had said.

"Bust-up!" Fenton exclaimed. "Whatever do you mean?"

"This place is far too uncivilised. There is too much fetish palaver. One day it will bring a big trouble."

"But what sort of trouble?"

Keenly Fenton was leaning forward. He remembered Gerard's forebodings, he was mindful of the staring image in the forest, and he wondered whether now at last he was going to get a piece of first-hand information which would somehow connect the two.

"As for that, I can't tell." Davis wished he was free to speak his thoughts. He wished that here, on this ridge with its green open spaces reminiscent of Latuba College, he could have spoken freely about the night-watchman, his uncle's mysterious preoccupations, the nocturnal visits of Komfo Kabachi, the general air of expectancy in the town, his own indeterminate fears. He would have liked to unburden his mind and there was no one else to whom he could do so. But he could not be sure that Fenton would not feel obliged to pass the information on, to the police perhaps. And once the police knew, the whole town would know he had been giving information to

the white men. He might even be summoned to the police station for questioning. It would be said he was in the white men's pay. He didn't want to be involved in anything. That was why he wanted to get out, before anything happened in which he could be involved. These Europeans did not understand what family and tribal obligations could be. They were not just sentiment, about which one could please oneself. They were vital bonds. A branch cut from its tree dies. It cannot attach itself to another tree.

To go against one's own side, that was the unforgivable thing; not to commit a crime, not to live in idleness, not to cheat one's neighbour or employer. Those did not make one an outcast. But 'white man's friend!'—that, if it meant an alliance and not just cups of tea and innocuous exchanges, could be a deadly charge. Tinga was greeting him with it already, though one did not take Tinga's taunts very seriously. It could bring isolation, a final, complete separation from one's own people. "A man has only one home," as the old Nyankwa proverb said. If he lost it there was no substitute. Davis had sometimes thought that if he became successful he would build a house in Nyankwa; a proper, comfortable house in the European style. It would be the seal on his success, even if he seldom lived in it. He would never want to build it anywhere else, and he would find little gratification in building it in Nyankwa if the people had disowned him.

For Fenton, Davis's last remark had brought down the usual frustrating fog just as he hoped to lay hands on something tangible. A loud knock on the front door cut short any further attempt, a voice called, "Is anyone at home?" and Dave Mackinnon, walking-stick in hand, came across the threshold. Fenton started up to meet him. The bank manager's eyes moved between Davis and Fenton before he said:

"I'm sorry, Mr. Fenton, I didna know ye had visitors. I've just heeard I'm to go on leave next month and I dropped in to know if ye'd care to take the Lion during my absence."

"Oh, I see. . . . This is Davis. Do you know Davis, my clerk?"

"Aye! I know Mr. Davis. How are ye, Mr. Davis? Not gone to Britain yet, I see. Is your uncle's cocoa not up to expectations this year or is there some other snag in your way?"

Davis smiled uneasily and looked at Fenton.

"Please, sir, I beg to take leave."

Fenton, unwilling to admit that their conversation must be broken off just when it might have led somewhere interesting, tried to dissuade him. But Davis insisted and, when he had gone, Fenton agreed to take the Lion as being the easiest course; he did not think it necessary to mention that his own continued stay in Nyankwa was no longer assured.

"Aye," said Mackinnon, watching him thoughtfully. "I'm grateful. Ye're the only one that can manage him. Drop in at my place for a drink some time and I'll tell ye about his chop."

Mackinnon declined an invitation to sit down, but did not go before he had sent a quick look of appraisal round the bungalow. He could not have been here since the night of the tragedy, and when Nunoo came out of the bedroom where he had been putting down the mosquito-net the bank manager lowered his walking-stick to the floor with a pronounced tap and went out of the bungalow with marked abruptness.

In the office next morning Fenton again asked Davis what he had meant by his forecast of a bust-up. But the office with its background of shouting labourers and revving lorry engines was not a suitable place for such confidences, and Davis, sus-

picious of the obvious eagerness behind the enquiry, replied in a negative, off-hand way which showed he no longer wanted to discuss the matter.

"There is too much fetish palaver in this town. The fetish priests are too powerful altogether. They do not like progress."

"But that's what your Association is for, isn't it? To spread better ideas."

"Yes, sir. . . . Our meeting tonight is cancelled. It is very unfortunate."

He went on to explain that ever since the Progressive Youth Association was founded two years ago it had held its meetings in a disused shed put at its disposal by the local manager of the Amalgamated African Trading Corporation. But only that morning Davis, as secretary, had received a letter from Hoskice to say that this concession must be withdrawn.

"That's bad luck," said Fenton. "Why?"

"The reason is not stated, sir. It is very difficult to find suitable premises in this town. The houses are not large at all. . . . Please, sir, we should be very grateful if you would see Mr. Hoskice for us, sir?"

"I'm afraid I couldn't do that," Fenton replied. He would now be able to go to the Van Huyts' dinner-party. He could ring her up at once. Would she be pleased? She would probably decide that he had cut the meeting purposely and make a remark to that effect before the other guests. She would be playing her part again. He could go to the house for dinner and retain the foothold, whatever that might amount to, which he had obtained there; and he could make up to Van Huyt just sufficiently for the possibility of that little billet in the brick and tile works to be kept in view; and he could take Rita's gibes in good part, like everybody else, while Nyankwa with its shoddy streets and compound, uncouth

inhabitants and cooking-pots stuffed with dried grass before monstrous images could be left to itself. But he had another inspiration.

"Look," he told Davis, "if you want a place to meet tonight, come up to my bungalow. I should be very glad. . . . All we shall want is a few extra chairs, if you can arrange that. . . . I'll expect you round about seven."

The members were punctual. They arrived in twos and threes, coming up the bungalow steps out of the darkness, wearing sun-helmets and white suits. Most of them were somewhat bashful, answering Fenton's "How do you do?" with "Quite well, thank you," as Davis introduced them. But one or two were more forthright in their manner, in particular a tall, lean, youngish man called Siribuor who kept a fancy goods and stationery store in the town and who had a set, concentrated expression as if he at least were determined on the utmost possible progress in the shortest possible time. Fenton had met only a few of them before. He knew Mr. Brobby, cashier in the Guinea Bank and President of the Association, corpulent and elderly, ponderous in voice and manner; and young Willie Essuman who served behind the counter in the provisions department of the Trading Corporation, a bright, smiling little man always talking; and Davis himself, smart, beaming, smooth and easy with his introductions, displaying in all his words and actions the assurance of one who was no stranger in this bungalow.

Mr. Brobby was on his feet making some laboured introductory remarks to the audience, which stretched back in half a dozen short rows of chairs towards the far end of the room. The pressure lamp hissing on a tall stand near the President's chair threw yellow beams across the dark faces.

". . . convey our grateful thanks to Mr. Fenton for his

kind hospitality to us," concluded Mr. Brobby, sitting down in one of the two arm-chairs with obvious relief.

From the second row Mr. Siribuor rose immediately.

"Mr. President, of course I heartily endorse all what you have said. But I want to know why we have been evicted from our former premises. What have we done to deserve such an arbitrary fate? I think we are entitled to an explanation."

He waited to let his words sink in before sitting down with a quick glance round at the audience behind him.

"Of course you have to remember," said the President heavily, "that we never paid any rent for the premises. The Corporation just allowed us to use them. So they have the right to turn us out if they want to."

"Mr. President," exclaimed Willie Essuman eagerly, "I think I can shed some light on this matter. Mr. Hoskice thinks we are too politically minded. Even I heard him speaking on telephone to the Superintendent of Police at Adantakrom about us. He said the Corporation has always kept aloof from politics. And that, in my opinion, is why he does not want us to use his premises again."

"Of course we are politically minded," declared Siribuor indignantly. "Every young man is politically minded. It is a mark or sign of our growing national consciousness. But that does not mean we should be hounded from pillar to post whenever we wish to exercise our rights as free men. Mr. President, we should, in my submission, immediately pass a resolution of protest against the treatment which has been meted out to us. And forward a copy by cable to the Secretary-General of the United Nations. On grounds of gross racial discrimination."

"That's right" said a voice. "Lake Success."

There were a few laughs. Fenton, sitting slightly apart in

the remaining arm-chair, saw one or two grinning faces turn towards him. He smiled back.

"If you want to move any resolution," the President carefully explained, "our rules say that at least seven days' notice must be given to the secretary."

"That's right," said the same voice. "Rule twenty-six."

Mr. Brobby cleared his throat. After fumbling in various pockets he produced a piece of paper and a pair of spectacles. The spectacles being satisfactorily adjusted he held the paper towards the light, scrutinised it with raised eyebrows much as if he had never seen it before, and continued:

"The subject for our discussion tonight is 'Whither are we Drifting?' Mr. Siribuor, your name is the first on the list of speakers before me. I call upon you to open the discussion."

It soon became clear that 'Whither are we Drifting?' was a euphemism for 'Down with the Sobosso Mining Company'. The tone was set by the dynamic Mr. Siribuor, whom the *Kurakessie Times*, Fenton remembered, had recently described in its social column (*Out and About* by Bright Spark) as "one of the most enterprising of our younger African Business Men, who may be expected to make his indelible mark on our political scene very shortly." He began by hoping that their host for the evening would not take as personal anything he might have occasion to say concerning the activities of the mining company "in our midst." Their host would probably not like to hear some of the things he was going to say. Nevertheless he meant to say them, for he was confident that their host would not expect him to keep silent merely by virtue of the fact that "the venue of our meeting tonight" was the property of the company in question.

Fenton decided that he did not much care for Mr. Siribuor, an arrogant, self-assertive young man. Nor did he listen very

carefully to Mr. Siribuor's speech, for it contained little that he had not read before in certain trenchant articles in the *Kura-kessie Times*. Mr. Siribuor was very indignant that the riches of his native soil were being ruthlessly exploited and shipped away to make houses for people in Britain while here in their own town of Nyankwa their houses were too few and fit only for goats. Their country was being stripped of its resources and when at last they obtained self-government they would find they had succeeded to a *damnosa hereditas*. That was where they were drifting to. Even some young men had been made convicts for removing small quantities of linxite from the yard. He would not advocate theft or violence at any time, but thought that people should be allowed at least to buy linxite from the company in reasonable quantities to build new houses. "It is ours," he said, "ours by just inheritance. We have a prescriptive right thereto. I demand that the linxite mine be immediately nationalised."

Other speakers followed on much the same lines, though somewhat milder in tone, and they all thanked Fenton very warmly for putting his house at their disposal. They went on to say that the Government had neglected Nyankwa for too long, that the town needed a hospital, new post office, water supply, and more latrines, and that when the Government said that building materials were scarce they could not understand, because every day they saw trains full of linxite leaving Nyankwa; and they believed that linxite was very good building material indeed.

Fenton supposed that he would be expected to make a reply, and the suspicion that this was why they had invited him to the meeting gave a check to his enjoyment. Still, they would never have invited Gerard or, presumably, Hobden. They must have some confidence in the sincerity of his feelings



towards them. To that extent he had been accepted. And they were pleased to come to the bungalow. They had walked up from the town in the dark, nearly thirty of them. It must be a full meeting.

Fenton watched them, the rows of dark heads with eyes glinting, the pressed white suits. He thought of the mild manners of the majority, the exuberance of Mr. Siribuor, the smooth, polished appearance of Davis and some of the younger members, and he wondered what, if anything, they had in common with the image in the fetish grove, and whether they felt any kind of affinity with it. They would not openly admit such an affinity, of course. Davis had spoken disparagingly of the whole fetish business and so would the rest if challenged. But sometimes one glimpsed a certain look, the look of the old primeval past; the look from which anything like a smile or alert expression had been obliterated, leaving fear, suspicion, an awareness of imponderable forces no other race could understand. Fenton never saw it without feeling that the limits of common understanding had been reached, that beyond was a dark uncharted sea. He had seen it on Davis himself, the Old Latuban, just before his strange prophecy of a bust-up. It had been as if all the years of westernised schooling had suddenly failed to stick, showing the real, unchangeable, unfathomable African nature.

Fenton thought it was strange that he should be here acting as host to these people, whereas a little over two months ago he had been living in London in complete isolation and insignificance, with the prospect of an endless succession of bed-sitting-rooms and basement offices. Like others he could no doubt have improved himself with correspondence courses, night schools, and spare-time studies, but he had never felt that the effort would take him anywhere that he particularly

wanted to be. Just where he wanted to be he could not have said, until that chance incident in the café which had sent him off to Mr. Cassap, when he had seen before him a life entirely new and curiously seductive. Nyankwa, a remote hole in the forest, was where he found himself. It was a place which most other people wanted to get out of as quickly as possible, and if all that Van Huyt had told him was true he might soon be having to leave Nyankwa himself. The only alternative was to remain with the company even if Van Huyt took it over, but to be beholden to Van Huyt for his daily bread was not an attractive prospect. He had too many of the signs of complete unscrupulousness. Rita had said he had a 'sentimental streak' where Africans were concerned and wanted to do something for them. If so he was a strange mixture. He was subjecting his daughter to a test of endurance which might well lead to a mental and physical collapse. Fenton felt that if he were ever to work for Van Huyt he would in some way be letting Rita down. It was, he told himself, an exaggerated notion. He had no duty of loyalty to Rita Van Huyt. Yet between them there was a relationship—he refused to deny it—which had arisen from her speaking to him in a way he was quite sure she had not spoken to anyone else since her arrival. Williams would certainly have been put on edge if he had known. Also there had been her mysterious appeal to be informed as soon as he 'discovered anything'. What she had had in mind he had never understood. But as one in distress she had appealed to him—that at least was how in less cynical moments he liked to regard the matter—and in so doing she had drawn him on to her side.

"We should now be grateful," Mr. Brobby was saying, "to hear any comments which our host, Mr. Fenton, may care to pass on our discussion tonight, You all know Mr. Fenton.

Since he has come to live among us he has given concrete evidence of the sympathy and interest which he takes in our affairs. We shall listen to anything he says with the closest interest."

There was a round of applause. Fenton was the target of rows of gleaming eyes. In some embarrassment he stood up.

He knew all the stock answers. Raw linxite was useless for building. It had first to undergo a complicated manufacturing process in England. There were great difficulties in establishing a factory locally for this purpose. Besides, it was doubtful whether linxite houses would stand up to tropical conditions. There was no need to fear that the linxite deposits at Sobosso would soon be exhausted. They were estimated at more than two hundred million tons. If the present rate of extraction were multiplied by ten, the deposits would last some two hundred years.

He explained all this in terms as simple as he could manage, but with the less conviction because of what Van Huyt had told him. "Build a factory here, then! There's no difficulty." That was an understatement. But the difficulties could no doubt be solved with sufficient determination. The kind of determination required to establish a local factory was not conspicuous in any of the company's local management, as all these people could very well see. He was made to feel that he held an impossible brief which would not stand up to much cross-examination. If he wasn't careful he would be led into a discussion of the company's accounts. Mr. Siribuor, forthright as ever, roundly declared that it was obvious that the Sobosso Mining Company was here solely in the interests of the British imperialists.

The discussion being over and the President having congratulated all speakers on the high level of debate, Nunoo,

wooden-faced as ever, took round glasses of beer. Fenton, glancing out of the window, noticed that tonight there was no light in the club-house across the golf-course. He could easily imagine that the chatter and high-pitched laughter of his African guests was the only sound for miles around. But only five hundred yards up the road there was another party with bright lights, with Rita resplendent at the head of the table, being at her best tonight, her next remark keenly awaited, and she herself, a continuous object of curiosity, never very far from the final collapse. It might come tonight, a lurch forward or a dash from the room; and later, as a convalescent invalid, the return to England which could no longer be withstood. If he were able so much as to see her off from Nyankwa railway station, that would be all. He would remain at Nyankwa or move on to Forest Reef or any other place which would take him. Again he assured himself that he had nothing in England to go back to. His interests were here, with these people.

Fenton moved nearer the President.

"So what are you going to do for new premises, Mr. Brobby? Have you anything in mind?"

"Nothing as yet," replied Mr. Brobby, puckering his forehead. "We shall have to put our heads together and go round. It will not be easy, I must confess."

"Well," said Fenton lightly, "I'm sorry we can't supply you with linxite or you'd be able to build a place for yourselves, wouldn't you?"

"That's what we were hoping," said Willie Essuman, his face all smiles. "But thanks to your interesting address we have been made to see that it's impossible. . . . You like Nyankwa, not so?"

"Yes, it certainly suits me."

"You are very exceptional, excuse me to say. Most Europeans do not like Nyankwa. Even I am a native of Nyankwa myself and I do not like it. So how much more strangers!"

"What's wrong with it?"

"The town has no improvements. And just now no water. The stream is nearly dry. You wait there with your bucket for twenty minutes with so many people before you can get. It is very tedious and not at all encouraging. And sometimes the scene is too disorderly. We really need rain very badly. You have a tank, not so?"

"Yes. A very large tank. Just behind the house."

"Then you are blessed," said Mr. Essuman happily, draining his glass. "I drink to you, sir!"

They began to depart soon after this. Fenton shook hands with each of them as they expressed their thanks. The occasion was ending on the same formal note as it had begun. They went down again into the darkness. Fenton followed Mr. Brobby down the steps and accompanied him to the road.

"You must let me know how you get on in your search for premises," he said. "There's no reason why you shouldn't meet here again if you want to."

"We shall be very grateful to you, sir," Mr. Brobby replied. "Good night, sir."

## XV

AT midday the following morning Stanley Bull drew up outside the yard in his veteran four-seater just as Fenton was leaving on his bicycle.

"Hallo! Hallo!" he called out. "I'll run you home. We can put that thing of yours in the back of the car. They look about the same vintage, don't they?"

Fenton agreed the more readily because he wanted an opportunity to ask the Inspector of Works' opinion of the road up the hill from Sobosso to the mine.

"A damn good road," was the reply. "Built by an Italian contractor, ex-internee, after the war. Fisher got hold of him. There's nothing about road-building those chaps don't know."

"Someone was saying it wasn't very safe."

"Don't you believe it! Of course it's safe. What's wrong with it? It turns a bit slippery in wet weather, but then laterite always does. Put a bit of gravel on it and it's all right. It's a pity the same chap didn't make the road I'm working on now. Your lorries would get through in half the time. Though mind you," Bull added, "it'll be the best road in the country by the time I've finished with it."

Stanley Bull's opinion ought to be good enough, Fenton thought. Van Huyt was no road-builder and he was also biased. But before any more questions could be asked Stanley Bull turned in at the club. This had not been in the agreement. The Inspector of Works had distinctly said 'home'.

"Thanks very much," said Fenton, beginning to lift out his bicycle. "You've saved me a ride up the hill."

"Nonsense. You're coming in for a drink."

"I'd really rather not."

"Of course you are. A bottle of beer will do you good. The week-end's before us."

Fenton yielded. They had been pretty keen to get his five guineas subscription. The treasurer, someone in the saw-mill, had sent round to his office especially. Afraid he'd back out, probably. On the strength of it they could endure his company for half an hour. He wondered if the Van Huyts came in on a Saturday morning.

But as soon as they entered the large room with its billiard-table in the centre and the bar at the farther end, he regretted his decision. Among the group leaning against the bar counter was a tall, fair, thin-faced man of about thirty-five, in a bush tunic of military design with three silver stars on each shoulder and khaki, blue-topped stockings.

"Bill Tewkes, my God!" exclaimed Bull, hurrying forward with outstretched hand. "Where the hell have you sprung from?"

The Superintendent of Police put down his glass and returned Bull's greeting in the same hearty manner. Bull indicated Fenton.

"You know Fenton, Sobosso Mining Company?"

"Ah—yes," said Tewkes very deliberately, as if this were an encounter he had been expecting. "How do you do?"

"We came out on the *Tai-ku*," said Fenton. "I don't suppose you remember."

"So we did, old boy. I'm terribly sorry. We all come to Nyankwa in the end, don't we? Have a drink."

He spoke in a loud, full tone and the eyebrows over his large, rather prominent eyes were raised interrogatively.

"This is my round," said Bull. He called to the steward-

boy behind the bar. "Atta, pass some beer for these masters."

"Ye'd better compromise on me," said Dave Mackinnon, dropping his book of club tickets on the counter. "Beer all round, Atta, and don't spill any."

"From Latuba they sent me up north," Tewkes was saying, "and I was just about dug in there when I was whistled down to take over at Adantakrom. They don't need any police in the north really. They're all too well behaved. Not like the lot down here. And I've just run over to Nyankwa for the week-end to have a look at the place." His eyes rested on Fenton for a moment before he added, "Nothing like Nyankwa to set one up, is there, Dave?"

"Ye're quite right. But my friend Mr. Bull and I, as the club's oldest members, ye'll understand, are going to propose a rule at the next general meeting that non-resident members should bring their own whisky. The club at Adantakrom's run dry and I'm thinking that's the reason for your visit today, is it not? An' the whisky here, 'e no catch proper, eh, Atta? The whisky no catch. How much whisky you get now, Atta, eh?"

"Small small, sah," said the boy, grinning with downcast eyes as he wiped the counter.

"Aye! Small small. An' that's an understatement of the seriousness of our situation. Never you try to deceive a policeman, Atta, they write everything down."

Fenton's mind reverted to the voyage out, when Tewkes, an athletic figure, had been much to the fore, organising deck games and winning most of them, organising sweeps on the ship's daily run and winning some of them, and getting up a concert for the last night on board in which he had given an exhibition of card tricks. And there had been the evening



when the ship was far to the south and Tewkes, sitting in the crowded, overheated saloon and knocking his empty glass on the table, had drawled out, "These bloody miners!" when a group of dishevelled passengers in unbuttoned shirts at a nearby table had seemed to be getting more than their fair share of the steward's services. Fenton had last seen him going down the *Tai-ku's* gangway, not at the quayside, but into the pilot's launch, several hours before the ship docked. They had approached the coast the previous evening but had lain to half a mile outside the harbour until dawn. On that still morning when the ship's engines were stopped and the sun was not yet up, Fenton, as he leaned over the rail, saw Tewkes descending the gangway, in uniform for the first time, one hand on his belt, his khaki tunic and shorts and peaked blue cap as trim as if he were stepping out on parade. The native boatman in white bluejacket's uniform standing in the bows of the launch thrust with his pole at the ship's side and with Tewkes sitting in the stern sheets the launch was away across the water to Latuba, where the white walls of the buildings were beginning to emerge through the twilight. It was to be presumed that there was someone on shore to give Tewkes breakfast immediately he landed—a brother officer, no doubt; and a special train, car, or even aeroplane, to convey him northwards with all the urgency commensurate with the time and manner of his disembarkation.

"Another splice," said Tewkes, setting down his empty glass. "Have another splice! Boy, some more beer."

Once again there was the hiss of opened bottles and the rattle of metal tops on the counter. Tewkes was fitting a cigarette into his holder.

"That was a curious business you had up here a few months back," he said, gripping the holder between his teeth as he

smiled. "The Hobden case, I mean. What happened exactly? Why did he do it?"

"He came in here at midday," said Bull. "Had two or three drinks. Seemed quite normal. In fact he was in better form than usual. We expected to see him again in the evening. But he didn't come. We sat on for a bit. It was practically dark. Then we heard it. His bungalow's just across from here, you know. Wasn't very loud. Like a hunter's shot in the bush. That's what we took it for, anyway, so we just sat on. About an hour later that boy of his arrives. As cool as you please. 'My master die,' he said. That was all. We piled into a car, someone remembered to grab the boy, and we went round to the place. And there he was. On the floor."

"Dead?"

"He'd made a good job of it," said Stanley Bull, lifting his glass.

There was silence, while the boy behind the bar picked up a cloth and with lowered eyes again began wiping the wet stains on the counter. Fenton wondered how many times Atta must have heard this story. It was *the* story of Nyankwa, the story which every visitor and newcomer wanted to hear and which every resident wanted only the excuse to tell. Wouldn't they ever tire of it? He stood stiffly against the counter, unable to prevent an angry flush.

"An' the funeral," said Dave Mackinnon. "Man, but you should have seen the funeral. Asbestos's lorry with the coffin back-firing up the hill to the cemetery an' all of us behind an' wondering whether to cut an' run for it. An' when they went up to dig the grave in the morning they found the European cemetery full, the last berth being taken by old Turbot who fell down the steps of his bungalow five years ago. No one had realised there was no more space. An' then young Nichols

the Assistant D.C. looked up the law and found it was an offence to bury anyone in ground not declared to be a public cemetery. I'm not sure he hadn't to get on to the Governor himself before he was through. What they did in the end was to put him just outside the wall an' extend the wall afterwards. Poor old Hobden! He'd have laughed louder than anyone. Aye! Perhaps he's laughing now. . . . Which reminds me, Mr. Tewkes, that as an old acquaintance of the deceased ye might welcome the opportunity of contributing to a fund which has been organised for the erection of a suitable memorial as soon as the ground has settled."

"Certainly," Tewkes declared. "I'll send you my cheque."

There was another respectful pause while Tewkes, leaning sideways against the bar, contemplated his glass.

"This boy you mentioned," he said presently. "What happened to him?"

The question was bound to come. No one who wanted the whole story could ignore it. But there was no immediate reply. There was momentary embarrassment all round. Even Williams was not immediately prepared.

"He's with me," said Fenton curtly. "I took him on when I arrived." He looked at Tewkes as he spoke. "Are you going to re-open the case?"

"Do you think I should?" returned Tewkes.

They stared at each other.

"There are quite a lot of people," said Fenton with forced calm, "who don't think it should ever have been closed. They hold a little inquest of their own every time they meet. Their verdict is always the same—that the steward-boy had something to do with it. There isn't any evidence of that, of course, but you may like to try your luck. I'm living in the same bungalow, you know. Come round some time and Nunoo

Will show you the exact spot. We ought to put a plaque there, I think, with some of this money which Dave has been collecting. For the information of future generations of investigators."

The others sought refuge in their glasses or lit cigarettes. After being so ready to tell the story they now wanted to get away from it.

"I'll accept your offer," said Tewkes, frowning through his cigarette smoke. "Half-four today suit you?"

"Come in for tea if you like. Then you'll see Nunoo in action."

"I'll drop in on my way to golf. You don't mind, Dave, if I'm a few minutes late?"

"Aye! But the lad's right, Bill, there's nothing more to be got out of that case now. We'd best be forgetting about it."

"It's time we stopped forgetting about things in this country," said the foreman from the saw-mill. "These chaps get away with anything nowadays."

There was a general mutter of approval. The foreman's words were a summing-up which suited their mood. Fenton, from his position on the edge of the group at the bar, felt himself being quietly disregarded. But they had never asked him to contribute to Hobden's tombstone. He had been outside their circle from the start. Now he had plainly declared himself on Nunoo's side, and it only needed Tewkes to discover some incriminating evidence—had he been sent here as a special investigator for the purpose?—for there to rise up from the ridge a shout of exultation which would echo round the entire colony.

"They do not meet there any longer," Williams was saying. "I have been told that Hoskice has thrown them out. Not before it was time too."

"He spoke to me about that," Tewkes remarked. "Where do they meet now?"

"At street corners, it would not surprise me," Williams replied, not concealing his satisfaction. "And you can put a stop to that, can't you?"

"If you want to know, they met last night at my bungalow," said Fenton. He might as well go the whole distance now. "Quite a full meeting, too. Nearly thirty."

There was a quick turn of heads towards him. The mill foreman, a large man with a brick-red face, dropped his cigarette on the floor and trod it out slowly. Tewkes's hand which had just lifted his glass of beer was stayed half-way.

"They really got no notice at all," Fenton continued. "They had no time to arrange another place, so I offered them hospitality for the evening myself."

"And what was the discussion about this time?" asked Dave Mackinnon. "Latrines?"

There was a laugh, followed by another resort to glasses and cigarettes, although Tewkes as he drank kept his eyes steadily on Fenton. Ignoring this scrutiny Fenton continued to address the silent company.

"They do genuinely want to improve the town. You can't say it doesn't need it. And naturally they think of linxite as the obvious solution and get uneasy when they see it going overseas. They don't realise it's no good in its raw state."

There were one or two grunts, but there was no disposition to comment.

"I think it's important to meet these people and hear what they have to say," Fenton continued, pressing on into their slowly hardening hostility. "Then one understands. That's better than trying to live as if the people down there didn't exist."

He stopped, flushed with his effort, and there was another uneasy silence. They exchanged looks and picked up their glasses. The nearest to a retort was a half-audible remark by Williams that they were not in church, but this was followed by Mackinnon saying quietly:

"If ye take my advice ye'll steer clear of that crowd. They're a poor lot. Ye can't trust one of them. It's the nature of the country. An' it's getting worse. We all of us find it out in the end."

"It probably will get worse if we leave them alone," said Fenton.

Williams's pent-up indignation suddenly exploded.

"Bastards," he said, looking straight at Fenton. "Bloody, black-faced bastards, that's what they are." The look did not waver. "And some of them not so black either."

There was a deathly stillness. Even the circular movements of Atta's hand wiping the counter were suspended. Then Fenton jerked forward, his face aflame, hands clenched.

"That'll do, Dai," said Stanley Bull firmly, gripping Fenton's arm. "Take it easy," he said. "Take it easy."

Fenton strained forward. Then he shook himself free, turned his back on the bar and walked out of the club. He was conscious of them all staring after him, but he did not look back. This was the end. He was finished with them now. He glanced at the red roof of his bungalow among the trees on the opposite slope and then at the unsightly spread of rusting iron roofs which marked the town below. The sun being overhead there was an absence of shadow and flatness of perspective which made Nyankwa and its rising background of forested hills look peculiarly unreal and remote. The heat and the glare held every feature transfixed.

Before he could lift out his bicycle from the car Stanley Bull was beside him.

"Don't go off like this," he urged. "Come in for another drink. I'll make things all right. Dai Williams will apologise."

But Fenton went on getting his bicycle out of the car.

"I'm through with the whole blazing lot of you," he shouted as he rode off. "Tell 'em that. And unless you want another death up here tell Williams to keep out of my sight."

At that moment the Van Huyts' car swung into the entrance, almost forcing him into the ditch. He caught sight of Rita's scared face. But here again he did not look back. She would find her policeman now. Tewkes would tell her what he discovered. He was an athletic type. They would make a good pair together. In a few moments she would be learning all about the episode. She would get it out of them. They must have known about him for weeks. A copy of the form he had completed in Cassap's office with its *Parentage Unknown* would have been sent out for the local management's information and someone would have passed the word round. He ought to have known. It was another subject of conversation when he wasn't there. Only Williams had been unable to avoid throwing the taunt in his face.

Punctually at half-past four Tewkes drove up in his high-powered sports. A bag of golf-clubs had been thrown into the back of the car and his uniform had been discarded for a white sweat shirt, white shorts and white canvas shoes. His pale gold hair was newly brushed, his chin freshly shaven, but his biggish eyes were still interrogative, noting every detail.

Fenton was not yet in a very forthcoming mood.

"The scene of the crime," he said off-handedly. "Want some tea?"

"No, thanks, old boy, just had a cup. You like it here? Not had a chance to settle in yet, I suppose."

He was making every effort to be natural, as if the episode at the club had not happened, and Fenton waited while his eyes ran over the walls, furniture and floor of the bungalow. Tewkes would have had a minute description of the scene and circumstances from the police docket, so there was no need to point anything out.

"You know, old boy, I think I will have a cup of tea, after all. Do you mind?"

It was such a transparent pretext for seeing Nunoo that Fenton grinned. But when Nunoo finally appeared Tewkes asked him no questions, but merely observed. Nunoo put down the tray and went out again with a manner that was perfectly self-possessed.

"I thought we were going to have a reconstruction of the crime," Fenton said. "Isn't that what you came for?"

"No, old boy. Frankly, that case is closed. There's nothing to go on. As to what happened or why, your guess is as good as mine."

"Don't you want to question him?"

"Waste of time. The case is closed. No. What I would like to have a word with you about is another of your employees. This bird Davis."

"Oh?"

"You see a good deal of him, don't you?"

"Every day in the office. And he comes up here sometimes. Tries to teach me the language. Why are you interested in him?"

Tewkes ignored this question. He blew out a stream of cigarette smoke through rounded lips before asking:

"What sort of a chap is he?"



"I like him. And he's a very good clerk. And I think he's well, a cut above the rest in most ways."

"That's just the sort you've got to look out for," said Tewkes, blowing out more cigarette smoke. "The more brainy they are, the more ambitious. And the more dangerous. Interested in politics, isn't he?"

"I really couldn't tell you. He wants the town to be improved. That's the only political matter—if you can call it that—we've ever discussed. But what is all this for?" Fenton asked. "Have you anything against him?"

"We have to keep tabs on everybody these days. Especially P.Y.A.s and their members. Improving the town is only the start. Then they want to get rid of the chief. And then they want to change the government to suit their own peculiar notions, all with a riot or two thrown in to liven things up. The last riots in Latuba were caused by the Latuba Youth and Literary Society, to which your P.Y.A. here is affiliated, isn't it?"

"I haven't the least idea."

"But you must admit that its main object is political advancement."

"Perhaps. Is that sufficient to give it a police docket?"

"The two generally go together in this country," said Tewkes. "Davis started the Association here, didn't he?"

The questions continued. He got on to the meeting of the Progressive Youth Association in the bungalow, wanted to know what the various members had said, what Davis had said. With growing impatience Fenton became more and more non-committal. In all Tewkes said was the implication that at bottom he and Fenton were on the same side, that they and all the other residents on the ridge were in league together against something which had to be tracked down. His

immaculate, well-groomed, lithe figure was anomalous in the austere furnished room, but he gave no sign of distaste at his surroundings, though his slightly bulbous eyes were continually observant. He showed no irritation at Fenton's uninformative replies, but passed easily on to the next question. He tried a good deal of friendly charm to draw Fenton out, ably covering up the fact that from the purely social standpoint Fenton was a type that must have made him curl at the toes. He was a trained investigator, a first-class police officer whether in mufti or uniform and shaping his tactics accordingly, for whom Fenton, just now, was an object for the exercise of his professional talents.

"Are you expecting the P.Y.A. to meet here again?"

"I expect they will. I've given them a standing invitation until they've got a place of their own."

"I see." Tewkes seemed pleased. "Then you'll be pretty *au fait* with their activities, won't you? I'll be very grateful, old boy, if you'll keep me informed. If I'm not here you can get me at the Police Exchange, Adantakrom. Just give me a tinkle. And of course, you'll go on seeing Davis."

He looked at his wrist-watch and stood up.

"I don't think I quite understand," said Fenton, raising his voice.

"Don't you, old boy?" A line across Tewkes's forehead deepened. "I'll put it this way. We all want to avoid disturbances. Right? You're in a position to know a good deal of what goes on in a section of the community which contains most of the hotheads. Right again? Well, then, we'd like your co-operation. If you do hear of any plans, or if you see that they're getting worked up unduly about this and that, we'd like to know. That's all."

"There's one thing I can tell you about them now," Fenton

declared heatedly. "They're not a bunch of subversives or anarchists, as you seem to suppose. They're very ordinary people. They talk about ordinary things. You aren't really suggesting I should spy on them, are you?"

Tewkes's eyes hardened. He resented being accused of suggesting anything that was not absolutely above board; especially as that was just what he had suggested.

"It's up to you," he said curtly. "Your company's the principal object of all this agitation. If there's any trouble here it'll get a packet, with all the petrol, lorries and stuff you have in the yard. You wouldn't let your own company down, would you?—if you could help it?"

## XVI

THE news that the Chief and Elders of Nyankwa had decided to take a legal action claiming the ownership of the Sobosso lands on which the linxite mine was situated spread through the town a few days later. Immediately public excitement rose to the highest pitch. The serving of such a summons on the Chief of Sobosso was akin to a declaration of hostilities. Gone were the days when one could march upon one's enemies in full panoply of war, but there were still the law courts where warfare of a different kind, though none the less ruthless, could be waged, with victory, generally, to the side with the longest purse. The Sobossos were rich, for several years they had been growing fat on the royalties of the mine. But were they richer than Yow Boma, who had now, it seemed, decided to throw all the wealth of his cocoa farms and house property into the scales? And the prize? If the Sobosso lands were proved to belong to Nyankwa, then the mining company's lease with Sobosso would be invalidated and the Nyankwas themselves would control all the linxite. Truly, as the Krontihene had once said, there would soon be "much money in Nyankwa."

The war-drums were beating, processions of women smeared with white chalk went through the streets singing and dancing, gangs of young men helped themselves profusely to the wares of market-women, got drunk, and smashed empty bottles on the public thoroughfares. For this claim on Sobosso was in fulfilment of the promise made on the day of Nana Buachi Abrempong's first public appearance, when the drums

had told of great events to come. Too long had Nyankwa wallowed in the slough of despond and shame. She was now to assert herself against her ancient enemies.

On Davis the effect was consternation. He was aghast at such foolishness. The State Council, even his uncle, must be insane. The action could not possibly succeed. The Sobossos had been on these lands for generations, longer than anyone could remember. He could see no conceivable grounds on which the Nyankwa claim could rest. Twelve or fifteen years ago the Nyankwas had made an idiotic claim against Adantakrom over fishing rights in the Sansu River. It had failed, landing them in costs of thousands of pounds, there had been years of stagnation, and now, no sooner had they recovered from all that than they were preparing to do exactly the same thing against the Sobossos. The action could drag on for years, they would fight it up to the Privy Council, it would continue as long as their money, the Krontihene's money, held out. The chances of his going to England at his uncle's expense receded even farther, and the children's cries, "*Krachi Davis! Krachi Davis!*" had a sharper edge than ever.

Calling him to his room one evening, Yow Boma told Davis that he expected him to keep his eyes and ears open in the company's office and to report any observed reactions. "There will be talks between Fisher and the young man, and letters will pass. You understand?"

Davis inclined his head in acknowledgment. He wanted to ask a few questions, and he had to avoid anything that might give his uncle offence. So at first he merely asked whether it was true, as the whole town was saying, that the Sobossos were going to be taken to court.

"We have summonsed them," said the Krontihene. "The case will come on next month."

Sitting back in his usual attitude on the divan with his legs crossed beneath his cloth, Yow Boma was calm and confident. He did not indulge in fulminations against the Sobossos such as might have been expected from a man who had suddenly lost all sense of reality and reason, and such as could be heard from the women in his own household as they bent over their cooking-pots.

"It will be expensive," Davis continued.

"The reward is great."

He took a puff at his cigarette. Certainly he was not over-communicative, but on the other hand he did nothing to close the interview. He sat at ease, did not trouble to look at Davis at all, and his words were in the nature of asides. Davis had the impression that his uncle, having given his instructions, no longer thought the case worth talking about.

"We have a good chance, of course?" Davis ventured.

"We are ready. You will see."

"I really am begging you to send me to England soon. My work is too tedious here. I am not making any progress. I think it would better if I went away to be a lawyer, as you said."

Yow Boma gave his nephew a sidelong glance.

"You must have patience. You are a young man and you have plenty of time. This case will not last long. Until it is decided I want you to stay in the white man's office and tell me what they do. Then you can go."

"And you do believe Nyankwa will win this case?"

"An old hunter does not shoot at shadows."

Despite the Krontihene's confidence Davis still believed that the case would prove disastrous. It was unlikely that any convincing evidence in support of the claim had recently been discovered. Cases of this kind did not depend on documents.

One old man after another would go into court and give evidence and be cross-examined and re-examined for days on what he could remember and what his father and grandfather and uncle and great-uncle had told him. There would be long rambling discussions on the origin of the feud between the Sobóssos and Nyankwas. There would be mention of streams which had since changed their courses or which passed under different names, landmarks which had disappeared, villages which had changed their locations, old customs susceptible of half a dozen interpretations. What sort of case acceptable to any court could be made out of all that? And by the time it was done the Krontihene's farms and houses would be mortgaged to moneylenders and his wealth would all have gone to the lawyers.

At first Davis was hopeful that the Progressive Youth Association might use its influence to get the case called off. He spoke with the leading members. But they took their cue from the dynamic Mr. Siribuor, who saw the case only as a means of getting rid of the Sobosso Mining Company and replacing it with some enterprise in which the "sons of the soil" would hold all the shares and managerial posts and which would "build a new Jerusalem in our land". Those words had appeared in an editorial in the *Kurakessie Times* and they fired the imagination of all good patriotic members of the P.Y.A. who opened a 'Save Our Soil' Fund and in a few days' time were able to present to the chief a bag of small coins totalling £9. 8s. 11d. as a contribution to the legal expenses.

The Government did its best to restore sanity. An Assistant District Commissioner came over from Adantakrom and had a long private discussion with the State Council, but in vain. He was followed by the District Commissioner himself, who,

on the enstoolment of Nana Buachi Abrempong only two months back, had been congratulated by his superiors on the "happy solution of the deadlock in Nyankwa affairs which would usher in a new era of progress for the people." He too had an abortive meeting with the chief and elders and then decided to call a public meeting in which to make a final appeal for good sense. This took place with traditional splendour at five o'clock one afternoon in the courtyard of the palace. The chief sat in the centre, with his elders and sub-chiefs ranged on either side in the form of a crescent, all in their finest robes of silk and velvet, beneath state umbrellas whose twelve-inch fringes leaped and fluttered as the bearers twirled the umbrellas and jerked them up and down. At the feet of the elders squatted attendants with dummy, gold-hilted swords, and by the chief himself and each sub-chief stood a linguist or spokesman with a gold-topped staff. Ranked behind them and all round the courtyard was a mass of Nyankwa subjects. It was certainly a formidable spectacle which confronted the District Commissioner as he entered the courtyard, his only mark of authority being the small lion-and-unicorn crest which glittered in the front of his sun-helmet. He paused to take a glance round, murmured to his Assistant, and walked unhurriedly to the green-baize table and chair which had been placed for him about thirty yards from the chief in the centre of the courtyard. His barefooted police orderly in a red fez bustled up behind him with an office file and laid it carefully on the green-baize table.

In level tones the District Commissioner addressed the meeting while an African clerk standing a few yards in front of him translated sentence by sentence. The District Commissioner began by congratulating the chief on his election to the historic stool of Nyankwa. The debts were paid at last,



the people were united, the Government was anxious to help in improving the town, and a period of great progress and prosperity was before them. He was therefore sorry to hear that they now contemplated embarking on a fresh course of litigation which in his opinion could only lead to a forfeiture of all those advantages which they had recently gained, and bring about a still more disastrous situation than the one from which they had just recovered. He spoke in this strain for about twenty minutes, during which some impatience was manifested among the young men in the crowd. The atmosphere was heavily charged. A few of the elders sitting in front looked anxiously over their shoulders at the serried ranks pressing behind them. While the clerk shouted out his interpretation the District Commissioner tore a piece of paper off the file and scribbled a note to his Assistant.

"Put a police guard on the liquor shops and petrol stores."

The Assistant District Commissioner's departure drew some ribald vernacular cries.

"Buronyi (white man)! You sick small? You fear? You go for your country? You go ease yourself?"

The sun shone obliquely over the corrugated iron roof of the palace. In brightening the many-coloured designs of the people's clothes it gave their bare heads and shoulders a uniform intensity of blackness which seemed a power in itself. No European eloquence could divert it from its settled course. They listened, but it was not every day they had the spectacle of a European addressing them and soon the chief's linguist would refute him completely.

When the District Commissioner had finished there was more murmuring, like the restless swaying of the trees before a storm, but it quietened when the chief's linguist began his reply. He stood with his head tilted back, one hand held his

staff, while the other, at the end of a long dark arm, made wide, sweeping gestures reminiscent of exhortations on the field of battle. And every time he made some special point the squatting attendants lifted their swords and chanted in a slow deep chorus:

"*Yei! Yei!* He has spoken truly!"

He declared that the chief, during his visit to the fetish grove after his enstoolment, had sworn the Great Oath of Nyankwa, reaffirmed by the slaughter of twenty sheep, that he would not rest until he had put an end to the intolerable insults and deprivations which his subjects had long been suffering from their various neighbours. The Sobossos had taken advantage of Nyankwa's misfortunes to set themselves up as independent people, whereas from time immemorial they had owed allegiance to the Nyankwa stool. This was proved by the fact they had always sent a present of meat to each newly installed Chief of Nyankwa as an earnest of Nyankwa's sovereignty over their land. But on the installation of the present chief they had failed to do so, contrary to all custom and tradition. In older times the Sobosso people's ancestors had lived in Nyankwa, but after certain wars they had been entrusted with the safe keeping of the so-called Sobosso lands in order to guard them against hostile tribes on the other side of the hills. But they still owed allegiance to Nyankwa. When the white men came to open their mine the Sobossos had seen an opportunity to grow rich, and they had wrongfully assumed the position of landlords and retained all the rents and royalties without giving the customary two-thirds share to Nyankwa as the rightful owners of the land.

It was a long, rambling story which had already been told to the Assistant District Commissioner and District Commissioner at their private meetings with the State Council, and

it was now retold for the edification of the public, who echoed the sonorous *Yei! Yei!* of the squatting attendants with exultant shouts of agreement. The District Commissioner listened with no sign of impatience. But he could guess the story which the Sobossos would tell him when he visited them tomorrow or the next day. They would admit they had once lived in Nyankwa but would claim that in the time of their grandfathers (which might mean anything between two and five generations ago) they had been driven out by the then chief most unjustly and had been compelled to seek their home in new lands. They had settled in a place never previously inhabited which was now called Sobosso, meaning 'here is peace' or 'under the hill', according to the intonation. The allegation that it was Nyankwa land which they had been charged to defend was all lies; and if sometimes they had given the Chief of Nyankwa a present of meat killed on Sobosso land, that was merely a traditional mark of greeting from one neighbour to another.

There was no more to be said unless the feelings of the people in the courtyard were to be still more dangerously aroused. The District Commissioner did attempt a few final remarks but the interruptions were too many, there were ripples of movement along the back rows, and an agonised look from the interpreter appealing to be withdrawn from his somewhat exposed position, which was certainly in the direct line of fire. In fact no stones were thrown. The District Commissioner walked in a leisurely manner up to the chief, who sat quite still, his mouth more trap-like than ever, and gave him a farewell handshake. But the people were hooting now, their yells coming across the courtyard like the buffetings of an angry wind. The police orderly deftly removed the file from the green-baize table and followed the District Com-

missioner towards the street where his car with a small Union Jack on its radiator waited; while the people who had gathered in the courtyard under the crumbling walls of the palace began hopping and gyrating to the sound of the drums which had started, and chanting songs about Nyankwa's victories in the old wars.

In the Krontihene's compound Davis heard these sounds. Sensing the explosive atmosphere he had withdrawn from the palace courtyard half-way through the linguist's address. He had no desire to be swept into the street with a lot of rioters. There were extra police patrols in the town and the police in such circumstances generally grabbed the first people they could lay hands on and charged them with disorderly behaviour. That would not do for the clerk in the Nyankwa office of the Sobosso Mining Company and former sixth form student of Latuba College. Respectable persons stayed behind doors at such times and so, it seemed, did Tinga. Soon after the drumming began he came on all fours through the entrance to the compound, climbing over the high threshold with his usual agility. In front of Davis he sat back on his haunches and raised a hand to his round cotton cap in mock salute. There was the same jaunty grin on his face which betokened his sense of superiority to all surrounding circumstances.

"Are they going to fight?" asked Davis.

"Ah!" The exclamation was contemptuous. "They will drink much palm-wine and then go to sleep. Who would they fight? There are no Sobosso people here and if there were they would be afraid of them."

"They will not go to the company's yard?"

"The police are there with big sticks. And the Nyankwa people are small people. They fear too much." „

Davis had left the office at four sharp in order to attend the meeting, and he had been wondering whether to warn Fenton of the tension in town. The lorries ought to be sent back to Sobosso, where they would be safe. But Tinga's words reassured him. Tinga knew. He spent his days worming along the streets among people's legs or squatting in the market and at street corners. He heard all the gossip, though he never joined in those discussions round the evening stew-pot when the men and women of the household eagerly exchanged news of the doings of their neighbours. He was not, after all, a Nyankwa man. But Davis was ever conscious of an affinity with him because Davis himself was in one sense a stranger, having spent so many years in sight of the sea acquiring new knowledge. And he was still more conscious of this affinity today while the drums at the palace rumbled incessantly and he was so completely out of sympathy with Nyankwa's prevailing mood.

"White man's friend!" began Tinga, still in his Buddha-like posture. "You agree with all this palaver? You think it good?" He grinned shrewdly.

"It depends on the result of the case," Davis replied guardedly. "If we lose, it will bring great trouble on the town."

"So you fear? Why so? Is not the Nyankwa fetish strong, stronger than all the fetishes in Sobosso?"

"It may be. I can't tell." He wasn't going to tell Tinga his true feelings. Tinga might have been put up by the Krontihene to test his loyalty.

"They are going to make some big sacrifice," the little cripple continued. "That is why they have been consulting Komfo Kabachi. He has told them that the fetish wants a very big sacrifice before the case comes on. And they have to make some special medicine too."

"Is that so?" Davis was watching him closely. It was more, now, as if Tinga were volunteering information.

"It is what I hear."

"It will take the blood of many sheep and many bottles of gin to win this case."

"The chief and elders offered twenty sheep and two cases of gin and Komfo Kabachi said that was good, but at the next meeting he said he had consulted the fetish, who said that this was the sort of sacrifice made by old women and boys. And he said that in the old times when the Nyankwas had gone to war they had always given the fetish some stranger."

"Tinga!"

With dilated eyes Davis stared at him while the drumming from the palace reverberated dully, its rapid rhythm thudding and juddering. It was charged with grim purpose, it was deaf to all reasoning, secure in its own knowledge, and seemed to come out of the very ground. Tinga's grin had not left him. He squatted upright, his knees almost out of sight beneath his undersized body. He seemed to be viewing the whole stupidity from a distance with tolerant amusement.

"I have not been feeling strong these last few days," he said. "I think perhaps I have some small fever. It will be good if I take a rest and stay in the compound. Until the case is finished, perhaps."

With snakelike smoothness he untwisted his legs and went off on elbows and knees across the compound towards his corner by the Krontihene's room.

"Tinga!" shouted Davis, going after him. "What have you been saying? What do you mean? Do you really mean that they——"

But he could not utter the thought that was in him and in dismayed silence he watched Tinga settle himself against the

wall among his rags, ready to play the part of a sick person until it was safe once more for strangers to go about the town. In any case Davis could not have questioned him further because at that moment some of the women, laughing and chattering, entered the compound. They had white powder on their necks and faces, and were loosely swathed in cloths of blue-and-white, and they all wanted to know why Davis hadn't been out in the streets celebrating like everybody else.

## XVII

NEXT morning Fisher drove up to Fenton's office in his usual whirlwind style.

"Your precious Nyankwas," he said at once. "They're trying to get us off the land. Lot of damned nonsense. They haven't a hope in hell. The land's never been theirs. The judge'll throw out the case on sight if he's any sense."

But his breezy confidence was an obvious mask.

"I'm off to England for a few days by air," he continued. "Gerard will be in charge. You'll have to go up there tomorrow in a lorry with the month's wages. Here's the cheque." Usually it was Fisher himself who cashed the cheque at the bank during one of his periodical visits and took the money back with him. "Stay the night. Gerard will put you up. You've not been up to the mine yet, have you? Time you did. . . .

"Just you carry on," he added, getting back into his car. "I had the hell of a job starting this mine and I don't intend to be beaten by a lot of bush lawyers now. See you again in a week."

The car pulled out of the yard, but Fenton remained at the door of the office watching the labourers, whose task now seemed to be something of a wasted effort. This must be the crisis of which both Gerard and Davis had had their vague premonitions. Not for nothing was Fisher flying off to England. He was going to have talks with Mr. Cassap, and that urbane individual, with his back to the wall-map of West Africa stuck with little pins, might or might not have helpful



advice to offer at this critical stage in the fortunes of the Sobosso Mining Company. Fisher would be there in twenty-four hours. London was as close as that. African labourers sweated in the overhead sun while a few hours away Mr. Cassap's gas-fire burned, there was a drizzle in the streets, and if the Sobosso Mining Company folded up Fenton might find himself back there, aimless among the hurrying crowds. Van Huyt had said that when the Bipiasi gold-mine closed down none of the European employees could get another job in the colony for months.

He turned back into the office and called Davis. Davis had greatly changed in the last day or two. His polish and alertness were gone, as if something had occurred to extinguish his own particular vitality. The whites of his eyes showed more, they had the dull brooding look which Fenton had first seen that afternoon in the bungalow when Dave Mackinnon had so inconveniently interrupted. Now it was habitual. He was one in whom hope and ambition no longer shone.

But this morning he had determined on one last throw. "Please, sir," he began, when Fenton had told him of his visit to the mine next day, "I am appealing to you, sir."

"What about?"

"It is my passage to England, sir. Things are very difficult for me just now."

He lowered his eyes and Fenton guessed what was coming; and now he wished that Dave Mackinnon or someone would appear to interrupt them.

"I have decided that I cannot stay in Nyankwa any longer," Davis continued, still with downcast eyes. "This case is making things too difficult for me. I do not agree with it and it will bring a big quarrel between my uncle and me if I stay here. It is better if I go to England now."

"Do you think the case will succeed?"

"Oh, no, sir. There is no evidence at all. My people are behaving very foolishly. . . . I am begging you, sir, to help me with the passage money."

He had said it now and he raised his eyes slowly to see how Fenton had taken it. If he agrees, he thought, I'll write him a letter when I get away telling him everything, telling him what Tinga said, telling him to go to the police, to do anything to get this thing stopped.

Hopelessly Fenton dropped his hands on the desk.

"But I haven't got forty pounds, Davis. Ask your friend Brobby if you don't believe me. I had to buy stuff worth a hundred quid to come out here and anything I've got over at the end of the month goes to pay that off. It's impossible."

Outside the sun was high, searching out and expelling every vestige of shade, the lorries jolted past the open window, the long blue-robed figure of Braima Donga rose and gave a clang to the iron rail.

"I can't do it, Davis. I wish I could but I can't." He looked at the clerk earnestly, "Can't you hang on for a bit?" In two or three months, perhaps. . . . He really would have liked to help. But two or three months now seemed an unattainable period of time with this case coming on, the town in warlike mood, the *Kurakessie Times* with its screaming headlines of 'Down With The Imperialist Interlopers' And Linxite Overlords' and Fisher making an emergency dash to London.

He was annoyed that Davis did not believe him. There was a sulky look on the African's face as of one who felt he was being unnecessarily obstructed. Fenton was reminded of an ill-tempered schoolboy. He also felt that his liking for Davis was being proved insincere.

"Besides," he went on, "even if you did get to England and you had no money when you got there, you'd have a terrible time. Where would you stay? How would you live? It might be weeks, months, before you found a job. You don't know what you're letting yourself in for."

But even as he spoke he knew that Davis would only regard all this as so much special pleading.

"I am asking you to try for me, sir. It is really very essential." There was the beginning of a smile. "If you ask the bank manager he will give you credit."

"Well!"

Fenton's reaction was one of anger. He wanted to help but he couldn't and he had said so, and Davis ought to have taken his word instead of suggesting that he should go and beg Mackinnon for an overdraft.

"I couldn't do anything like that," he said sharply. "Don't you see?—with this case coming on and the general uncertainty I may be out of a job myself in a couple of months. The bank knows all that. It won't lend me the money."

He spoke with assurance. The reason satisfied himself, anyway. But David did not go. He stood there looking at Fenton, who felt as if he were being accused. He might have been under cross-examination.

"I think you'd better be getting on with your work," he said, resorting to the official tone in order to close the argument. "I'm afraid there's nothing more to say."

No more was said and the next afternoon found him on his way to Sobosso in one of the returning lorries, sitting next to the driver with his feet on a specie box containing the best part of a thousand pounds for the wages of the labourers at the mine. He had cashed the cheque that morning.

"Aye! Fisher said ye'd be dropping in about this," Dave

Mackinnon had remarked, while the Lion, coal-black, ugliness personified, sat on the counter. "Flown off to the U.K., hasn't he? Ah well, he's a likely lad but he's going to have a bit of palaver over this case."

From under his thick eyebrows he had given Fenton a shrewd glance. It was part of his bank manager's job to glean all the information he could about the future of an enterprise as important to the local economy as the Sobosso mine. But Fenton had nothing to give away. His only possible source of inside information about the case was Davis and he could not expect much from Davis now. He only knew that the future of the company was threatened because the Nyankwas were claiming rights over the land. It seemed a far-fetched claim, but one had to abandon the usual standards of judgment when estimating things in this country.

The screens of forest and thick bush on either side of the road to Sobosso were coated with the reddish laterite dust which billowed out from under the wheels of every passing vehicle. The lorry in front of Fenton's was always out of sight round the next bend but it left a cloud hanging over the road which there was no breeze to disperse. The dust settled on the broad elongated leaves of the banana trees, concealing their emerald brilliance, and on the corrugated iron roofs of roadside villages where pot-bellied children with dusty black skins waved to the passing lorry, their hands hesitating in disappointment when it did not stop. There was no moisture or freshness anywhere. The jagged sections of trees which had in the past fallen across the road jutted out from the banks or lay half in ditches, their interiors charred and hollowed out by fires which had been lit to facilitate their disposal. Groups of labourers dilatorily shovelled loose earth and stones into the worst holes and stood aside to let the

lorry past. The forest was parched, the idea of water could not be associated with such a locality, the barrier of dust-covered leafage along the road suggested that some desiccating blight had attacked the forest from the roots up.

But the rains were coming. Today the sky was overcast and the clouds, though high, were unbroken. In a few weeks' time the rain, driven by great winds, would come hissing and racing across the forest from beyond the hills; a mighty force which would cleanse, purify, refresh and destroy. It was the rain to which Van Huyl was looking forward with such gleeful expectation as making yet another difficulty for the Sobosso Mining Company.

Sobosso itself was a large village at the foot of the hills with little evidence of modern amenities to show for its royalties from the mine. The mud houses, as in Nyankwa, were small and drab, the same dull brown colour as the untarmac'd streets, whose gutters were deep, stony and eroded. They were bridged by single planks thrown across old dented petrol drums, whose ends were cut out to let the water through in time of rain. As in Nyankwa, there was the makeshift propping-up of roofs with rough-hewn timbers and large stones placed on the roofs to hold them in position during storms. In the occasional open spaces between the houses were dis-used lorries, rusting and half dismantled. Amidst all this shoddiness and decay the stocks of blue-and-white enamel basins, hurricane lamps, towels, yellow dusters and buckets displayed outside two or three petty stores had an arresting newness. Somewhere, presumably, there were some buildings on which Sobosso's reputation for progress depended—a school, a new court-house, perhaps even a post office where stamps of at least the lower denominations could be obtained. But Fenton did not see them. The lorry went quickly through

the village and was then changing gear in order to take the first upward bend round the side of the hill. Sobosso fell away and the road rose windingly, now twisting in towards the steep, overgrown hillside and now leading out towards the forest which stretched away below in the direction of Nyankwa. The lorry ground its way upwards. Near the top it passed a bare cliff-face where black apertures marked the galleries which had been cut into the hill. In a levelled space were lorries and arrangements of wooden chutes and derricks for loading the excavated linxite.

"The road didn't seem too bad to me," Fenton told Gerard later. "A bit narrow, but it looked safe enough. Quite an engineering feat, I thought. Van Huyt thinks the next rains will wash it all away."

"He's quite right," Gerard replied. "He's timed things well."

They were sitting by the light of a pressure lamp in Gerard's Nissen hut, after having a dinner, consisting entirely of the contents of tins, in a slightly larger Nissen hut which was used as a mess by the half-dozen European members of the company's staff. The meal, and the drinks preceding it, had been marked by a kind of spurious levity which seemed to assume that the days of the mine, or at least of its present management, were numbered. There were open references to the possibility of getting sea passages on certain dates within the next few weeks. It was a superficial, end-of-term atmosphere, but for these men who had helped to make the mine it must either have been that or unmitigated depression. There were slighting references to Van Huyt, the point of which Fenton could not follow. Indeed he could make nothing of the matter. Stanley Bull had said the road was all right and everything he had been able to hear in Nyankwa had suggested that the Nyankwa claim had little to support it.

Gerard had not altered. He lounged back now in his chair in an open khaki shirt and khaki slacks, his hair falling loosely across his forehead, the corners of his mouth sagging sardonically.

"Stanley Bull said he thought the road was safe," Fenton added.

"Stanley Bull!" Gerard was contemptuous. "He couldn't make a footpath. I butter him up to Fisher when I get the chance, but he really knows nothing about roads. If he can fill in a few pot-holes that's all he can do. You must have seen where the outer edge was going on that last bend."

"I didn't stop the lorry to examine it. But you don't seriously mean that the road's going to be washed away, do you?"

"With luck we could keep it open for about two more months, until the rains get really bad. But what's the point? To last any length of time it would have to be completely rebuilt. There'd have to be fillings, stone walls down the side of the hill, God knows what. And we can't raise the money for that now, thanks to Van Huyt."

Gerard put his hands behind his head and gazed up at the raffia mat ceiling.

"So we were hoping to borrow the money from him, were we?"

"God, no!" Gerard lowered his eyes and looked at Fenton. "You don't seem to know very much about this. I thought with your contacts in town you knew all the ins and outs. It's quite simple. We want fifty thousand quid to rebuild the road and replace essential equipment or we close down. Cassap had some people in London all lined up to put down the money. Then this case starts up. No one's going to put any money into a mine when there's a possibility that the land's

leased from someone who isn't the owner. So Cassap's pals have withdrawn."

"But the case can't succeed, can it?"

"Of course it can't. *We* know it can't. But it frightens off the investors, see? And it'll drag on for months, over a year, probably. The court will want a survey of the disputed land, for one thing, and no surveyor will take that job on for another six months, till after the rains. You know the sort of country it is. And in the meantime, of course, we can't get the linxite down the road, so we go bust, with the whole of the rest of the rotten syndicate and its dud properties. And Van Huyt buys up the whole bag of tricks. He's won."

"But I don't see—— Why are the Nyankwas bringing the case if it can't succeed?"

"Heavens above!" Gerard declared, uncrossing his legs. "Have I got to explain everything from Page One? It's Van Huyt! He's put them up to it. He's been working on this for months. First of all he paid the stool debts to get the chief on the stool and so settle their differences. Then he got hold of the Krontihene—God knows what he paid him—and persuaded him to get the State Council to bring this case. He's paying all their expenses. As soon as we close down the case will be called off. It'll be settled out of court. Nyankwa will get part of the royalties, I expect. Or maybe he'll dash them some shares; I don't know. He can keep them sweet in several ways. They're a corrupt lot. He's got them all in his pocket. Then he'll start running this gimcrack enterprise as it ought to be run. With his own money, what's left of it, and that of a few of his friends at home, he'll put in a railway to Nyankwa, run an overhead cable to the bottom of the hill, instal modern machinery, and make our present piffling production look like a Saturday morning shift. He'll make



millions." Gerard began to show some of his customary animation when the potentialities of the mine were being discussed. "We're sitting on linxite. Everywhere you go up here you're walking on linxite. And this is only one of the hills. All the others are the same."

"But if all this about linxite is true, we surely ought to be able to raise money ourselves somehow. There must be someone who's prepared to take a chance."

"That's what Fisher thinks, of course. It's why he's gone home. He thinks he can talk them into it. But people like a bit of security before they invest money, more especially when it's the West African Concessions Syndicate with the Bipiasi mine fiasco still in people's minds. Besides, Van Huyt's been preparing the ground. He's got his agents in London. It's all round the market that the local nationalists are demanding that the mine be nationalised—you recognise your friends the P.Y.A.?—that the Government won't let us renew the lease, that we're going to have labour troubles. All that doesn't help when you're looking for capital. And we may have labour troubles too. I'm expecting comrade Asbestos to tell us any moment that he can't go on supplying foodstuffs for the labourers except at impossible prices. He's in Van Huyt's pocket too. Van Huyt set him up in trade years ago. He's been using him as cover also. All this talk about Asbestos buying a timber concession and his money being used to pay the stool debts is just a blind. . . . Dave Mackinnon rescued Van Huyt from the gutter and Van Huyt rescued Asbestos. A fine back-scratching trio."

"And does Dave Mackinnon have a hand in this?"

"He knows all about it. You can't put through a deal like this without financial transactions of various kinds and Van Huyt has obviously taken him into his confidence. They're

always pretty thick, those two. And but for Dave Mackinnon," Gerard added with a yawn, "I don't suppose I'd have got to the bottom of this myself."

"Did he take you into his confidence?"

"He blew the gaff. I had a bit of a party with him the night before I left you to come back here. He was tight. He gets like that sometimes. You don't suppose he's got stuck in a dead end like Nyankwa for nothing, do you? At one o'clock in the morning we got on to the mine. I said something about its becoming one of the biggest economic developments in Africa. Maybe I was a bit tight too. Anyway, he wanted to bet me a case of whisky that we'd have sold out our interest in six months' time. If he'd been a bit less screwed than he was he'd have left it at that. But he went on mumbling about master-minds, the power of gold, things going on I didn't know about. 'Wheels within wheels' was what he wanted to say once, but at that stage he couldn't quite get his tongue around it. Then he said didn't I know we were a lot of so-and-so trespassers and wasn't it a shame for a father to treat his daughter so, and he said he'd tried to talk Van Huyl out of it, but he was an obstinate old Dutchman and so on and so on. It was all rather incoherent. And when he'd talked himself to a standstill he got to his feet and walked across the room and puked out of the window.

"I left him after that. Had to walk back to the rest-house. He was quite incapable of driving me home. I told all this to Fisher, but he laughed it off. And of course I couldn't see the whole thing clear until this case broke. Not that we could have done anything."

"What are you going to do," Fenton asked presently, "if the mine does close?"

"I really haven't the least idea, old boy. Get away, as far as

possible from Nyankwa, I should think. Some place where I shan't see Van Huyl strutting about like a turkey-cock. He'll get no help from anybody in this outfit."

"But what about the profits of the last few years? Haven't we any reserve funds?"

"Profits? You must have been reading the papers. We've just about been paying our way. What can you expect from our present production? If it were multiplied five times we might get somewhere. And you'd do it too with a bit of mechanisation and a railway straight through from here to Nyankwa and on to Latuba. Cut out all this fiddling about with labourers and lorries."

"But even if we do have to suspend operations when the rains come, couldn't we wait until the case is decided and then go ahead again?"

"As soon as we stop moving linxite the damages from broken contracts in England alone would put us out. I'm afraid whichever way you look at it he's got us by the short hairs."

"You'd have thought the company would have made sure in the first place that there were no other claimants to the land."

Gerard got up to pump the lamp and, as he pumped, the hut with its furnishings of camp equipment brightened and the darkness pressing up against the open door became still more intense.

"It does look rather strange now," he said when he sat down. "Fisher may have been a bit impetuous—you know what he's like. But the Sobossos were on the spot, no one doubted they were the owners, as indeed they almost certainly are. And the Nyankwas were forty miles away; seven or eight years ago they were completely insignificant, squabbling among themselves; if they have a claim why didn't they make

it then? The fact is that none of them had any ideas about Sobosso lands at all until Van Huyt began feeding them this old story he'd unearthed somewhere about the Sobossos originally being caretakers."

"They've certainly swallowed it. The whole town . . ."

"Of course they've swallowed it. These people will swallow anything that they think's to their advantage. . . . There's that bloody fool Vernon playing his piano."

Vernon was the company's accountant. The notes of the piano sounded from one of the neighbouring huts.

"He's crazy," said Gerard. "We're all crazy in some way or other. His particular form of craziness takes the form of bringing a grand piano out from England and humping it up here. Pretty soon he'll have to hump it down again, unless he means to leave it for the new management. Care for a drink before turning in?"

"No, thanks. I'll just have a stroll outside."

"O.K. Don't fall over the edge."

He went out of the Nissen hut. Lights from the other huts were widely scattered. The sound of Vernon's piano came from a hut about a hundred yards away. Fenton picked out a path across the rough ground and soon he could feel there was nothing between him and the forest hidden in the darkness below. He could go no farther. The breeze on his face was fresh and strong, not one of those faltering breaths which used to touch the ridge at Nyankwa. The bracing air, no doubt, was why Vernon could play his piano with such gusto. The powerful chords swelled out into the over-reaching blackness, rich, sonorous and sometimes turbulent. Turning his head to the right and leaning forward Fenton could see a few pin-points of light from the village of Sobosso, showing like a handful of stars which had fallen from the

unlit heavens and lay on the ground awaiting final extinction.

Clearly, he permitted himself to believe, he would have to tell Rita what he had just heard. He had made the promise weeks ago to keep her informed and the obligation still held. It was a justification for seeing her again that he welcomed, although if she shared the information which had prompted Williams's remark at the club he could see the gap between them as being immeasurably wider. But this time he would not aspire to speak to her as if they were on equal terms. Her words, "You don't know what you're saying," had taught him his mistake and he would not repeat it. He would not presume that she welcomed his advice or any sympathetic reference to her affairs. He would not compete with Williams in seeking her affections. He had made her a promise which he was entitled to keep, but he would give her only a straightforward account, wholly factual. The possibility that she knew or had guessed the whole crooked story already need not deter him. She might even give him some information in exchange.

He took one or two turns up and down the path, while Vernon's piano continued to sound forth its message of challenge and ultimate triumph to the vast unseen distances. Gerard had been right, up to a point. There was something crazy about it, suggestive of a madman orating in a deserted hall; and no doubt the villagers squatting in their compounds down there in Sobosso whose ears must have caught an occasional strain saw little sense in it. Fenton wondered by what set of hazards a concert pianist had found himself living in a tin hut on top of a hill above the West African bush. If he were a fanatical musician, as the power and attack of his playing seemed to suggest, he might consider it would be too much trouble to get his piano down the hill and decide to con-

tinue the prosaic business of earning his living under Van Huyt if Van Huyt would have him. No pedantic idea of loyalty to his present employers, or to anyone else, would stand in his way.

There had been a time when the small plateau on the hill was thick forest. Van Huyt had camped up here during his prospecting days, but, because he had been thinking of gold, he had missed the other wealth immediately beneath him. Then had come the young and now forgotten geologist, cutting his way up the hill with an army reconnaissance party, taking stock of possible strong points and lines of defence, and coming back later on an alleged shooting expedition, with a box for rock specimens. As a result the bush had been cleared, the trees felled—on his arrival Fenton had seen some of the great bare trunks still lying around—and yet another outpost of industrial civilisation had been established. But the foothold had proved precarious and it was so easy to imagine the huts deserted, partially concealed by tall grass against the windows, the paths no longer visible, rank vegetation and small trees spreading and growing everywhere unhindered—an abandoned settlement. If Van Huyt's plan succeeded this would not happen and larger and larger quantities of linxite would go rolling in trucks to the sea. But amid the African unknown which was all around him, so big that the piano-playing of the company's accountant now sounded hollow and ineffective for all its defiance, the plan to Fenton seemed unreal. It was too ridden with intrigue; Van Huyt had stirred up an ancient feud and set in motion forces which even he might be unable to control.

There was a last run up the keys, notes chasing and leaping over themselves to an apex, and two or three heavy chords were struck with a ringing, crashing finality. Fenton reckoned

it was time to go in. Gerard would have finished his bottle of beer by now.

"There you are," said the acting manager of the Sobosso Mining Company. "Thank God that racket's stopped at last. Quite early for once, too. Sometimes the fellow goes on till the small hours."

## XVIII

WHEN he told her over the telephone from his office that he had something to communicate, Rita asked him to come in at six, adding that her father had gone to Kurakessie. The day passed slowly and Fenton was punctual. Wearing a pair of white slacks and a long-sleeved, dark blue blouse she was standing by a clump of scarlet and yellow cannas picking off the dead heads when he walked up the drive. She welcomed him with a smile well calculated to put him at his ease, though her face was flushed and sweaty.

"These sandflies," she said, pulling off her gardening gloves and shaking back her hair, "they're terrible at this time. Unless you keep the extremities covered they eat you alive. It's one reason why I could never live here."

Her sounding of this note right at the outset confirmed him in his determination merely to give her the facts. It could be nothing to him whether she went or stayed. He himself wanted to stay and that should be enough. He followed her into the house, but she seemed in no hurry to hear his report.

"Go into the lounge," she said. "I'm just going up to wash the grime off."

She gave him a smile and he waited to see her go running up the stairs before he went through the gauze-like curtains into the lounge with its low chairs, wide, thickly-cushioned window-seats and walnut-coloured furniture. It was fifteen minutes before she reappeared and in that time she had changed into a frock, straightened her hair, and freshened her complexion.



"Do take your coat off," she said. "You look a bit warm. Why didn't you turn the fan on? And tell me what you've been doing all this time."

She moved a switch on the wall and the fan, driven by Van Huyt's private electricity supply, began to revolve. But he declined to take off his coat and her invitation to account for himself he also ignored. He would not be drawn from the strictly formal purpose of his visit.

"I was up at the mine last night," he began. "They told me one or two things which might interest you."

He went straight ahead and while he spoke she lay back in her chair, her head resting a little sideways on one hand. Her smile remained though her eyes became more concentrated.

"So that's it," she said when he had finished. "I thought something fairly crooked was up, but not as crooked as that. What are you going to do?"

"How do I know? Await developments, I suppose. We can't all of us pack our bags and go when we feel inclined."

"Philip!" He started at this, but she added quickly, "I suppose to you we absolutely stink."

"Oh no! Just a successful stroke of business. He'll probably make a better job of the mine than we have. I may even have to work for him."

"*Work* for him? You?" She sat up, her thin dark eyebrows more than usually arched.

"What do you expect me to do? Live on indignation?"

"Oh, but——" She slumped back in her chair. "There are other jobs to be found."

Tensely he watched her. One could not live on indignation, but it was tempting to give vent to it sometimes, even on an innocent party. She had once told him he didn't know what

he was saying, but her understanding of his own position was no better. She could go or she could stay, in England or wherever else she went she could live idly or amuse herself with a dozen different occupations. He restrained himself from pointing out that he had no such field of choice.

"I'm leaving," she said quietly, reaching out to the table beside her for a cigarette. "I'm sailing in a fortnight. I've realised it's hopeless. Your precious Nyankwa has beaten me." She lit her cigarette and waved the match with a careless gesture. "Since making up my mind you've no idea how much better I've felt. They say it's the effect of the climate. After a while you stop bothering and don't care. Your standards go overboard. And anyway I've got one last card. As soon as I get home I can nose out his partners and tell them some story which'll give them second thoughts. That ought to bring him back."

"But what would you tell them?" He was slightly shocked.

"I'm not sure yet. I could drop a few hints that things on the spot weren't what they seemed three thousand miles away. A suggestion that he was on the verge of a mental breakdown might be enough."

"I think that's going a bit far. Hasn't there been enough lying and crookedness in this matter already?"

"Not if a little more might end it. There are some situations in which——" Without finishing she held him with her eyes in a straight hard look before turning to the ash-tray beside her and flicking her cigarette into it.

"But you don't really think anything like that would work, do you?"

She shrugged.

"Probably not. But would you really be glad if it did?"

She had pierced right through to ideas which he had

scarcely yet realised and which he was even less ready to admit.

"Of course I'd be glad. Of course I want to see him stopped. What on earth do you mean?"

"You're quite sure you haven't changed sides—gone over to him?"

"Gone over to him? Of course not. Your father's plan is thoroughly vile."

Her lips tightened at this, but she had asked for it. Certainly he wanted to see Van Huyt thwarted. Such unscrupulousness sickened him. And yet—all the way down the road that morning he had been thinking it wouldn't be bad to live on the hill above Sobosso. It had been cold when he left, bracingly chilly, and he had looked down on the wraiths of mist which slowly curled and clung about the sides of the hill, high above the massed trees of the forest. He had been exhilarated. The Nyankwa office would be unnecessary when the railway was put through to join the main line. But they would need an increased staff at the mine if he hadn't failed at his present job. The new management might be glad to take him. It would be a great enterprise with endless possibilities. It would be something to belong to. Anyway, one had to live, and whether he joined Van Huyt or not could make no difference to her. She was cutting her losses. In a few days she would be well away and he would fade from her recollections with the receding coastline.

The room was getting dark. He had nothing more to stay for. But she wouldn't hear of his going. She was on her feet before he himself had fully risen, switching on the light in the tall shaded lamp-stand, calling for the boy to bring drinks.

"You're not going yet. You'll have to walk back, I'm afraid,

because this time Father's taken the car. You must have something before you go. Sit down again."

So he did sit down again. He allowed himself to relax back into the cushions, he stretched out his legs across the carpet, and helped himself to a whisky and soda from the tray which the boy presented to him. He set the bedewed glass on the table by his chair, enjoying the cold feel of the glass's surface. There was no refrigerator in his own bungalow. It would have been a pretty poor place to return to, so early; and that wretched pressure lamp of his needed a new mantle and the Trading Corporation, true to form, was out of stock.

A sense of well-being spread over him. He did not feel obliged to make any conversation. She had insisted on his staying, so the next move was hers. She sat with her bare legs curled up on the chair, her head resting on one hand which was almost hidden in her loose dark hair. Her slanting eyes were upon him.

"Don't you ever wear mosquito-boots?" he asked lightly. "You'll be getting bitten."

"Mosquitoes don't bother me," she said in a curiously flat tone, not moving and still watching him. "Only sandflies—mean, tetchy little brutes that itch the life out of you. But mosquitoes, no. The last one that bit me—or tried to—came to a very sticky end. I've been immune since then."

He took a drink. He would really have to get a refrigerator somehow if he were going to stay; though up on the hill the need would be less.

"Where do you live in England?" she asked.

This was not the sort of question which he welcomed, implying as it did the possession of a home, and he was surprised to find himself treating it lightly.

"I don't live anywhere," he replied with a grin. "I'm a nomad."

"Even a nomad must start from somewhere."

"I can't tell you where I started from. To the best of my knowledge and belief I was picked up on a doorstep."

*"What?"*

"Well, they didn't put it quite like that. They said I'd been found homeless when very young. Parentage unknown. So it must have been something like that. It may not even have been a doorstep. The proverbial gooseberry bush perhaps. Or even bulrushes. I just haven't a clue."

"I see," she said. "I'm sorry. I didn't know."

She seemed to be speaking the truth. Perhaps she hadn't heard about his clash with Williams at the club. Perhaps, after all, they had not given her the whole story. It was certainly a matter where, in the presence of ladies, they might well have taken refuge in reticence, especially when the lady was in the very particular position of Rita Van Huyt.

"There are all kinds of possibilities," he continued. He felt a certain recklessness. If she wanted to be curious she could have it all. "It may even have been a prison, in which case they were being even more discreet. A felon's cell. I doubt if it was quite as bad as that, but if you do find me breaking out some time——"

"Oh, shut up," she said irritably. "I shall begin to think you're getting tight. . . . Is there a word of truth in all this?"

"I can't tell you what the truth is. I suppose it could be ascertained, or some of it, but I've never bothered. It's probably better left hidden in the official archives. I've only told you what I've been told myself, plus a few random speculations. Your guess is as good as mine."

He had come to give her a simple account of the latest developments of the Sobosso Mining Company and he had ended by talking of himself in a way he had never done before and in which he seemed to have gone outside and beyond his own personality. She had had that effect upon him. She had taken his news about the mine and her father's part in the affair calmly enough, no doubt because she had already decided to leave. She had been able to hear him out with no more than a shrug of the shoulders. She was putting so much behind her. There were to be no more of those sessions at the club, no more attempts to cover up, to hold her own. He already saw the open sea stretching before her.

"You're lucky," he said.

Her eyes widened.

"Lucky? Because I wasn't found on a doorstep? Is it such a misfortune? In my case it might have been a blessing."

"No. I mean you're lucky because you're free. Free to go where you want, to do what you want."

"Free!" The tone was bitter. "There are some things one can't be free of." Her voice grew defiant, she had uncurled her legs and she was sitting forward, staring at him. "Memories! Do you think I'll ever be free of those? Nyankwa—all that's gone on here—more than you know—more than those idiots at the club will ever guess—do you think I can leave all that like an old shoe and never give it another thought?"

At the force of her words he sat up himself. He felt guilty of arousing her emotion, but it had shown how little resigned she really was. She had been pretending she no longer cared, but there was accumulated bitterness which now came bursting through at the first touch. He was emboldened to say quietly:

"I also had a shock when I arrived. Different from yours, of course. No comparison at all. But still . . . it must have been hell," he concluded.

She was looking at him with moist eyes. He was quite unable to say more. Last time he had urged her to quit. This she had now decided to do, but it had brought only a skin-deep relief and there was no other advice he could offer. He watched her helplessly, aware that a crisis was coming. He wanted to take hold of her, to assure her that he understood, to do anything but sit dumbly. But a few shreds of the strictly formal manner he had prescribed for himself still clung. Such conduct would have been an impertinence, he had no right, the differences between them were too great, she could have withered him with a word. She was Rita Van Huyt and he—he had just told her he did not know who he was.

● As he watched, wondering whether he still had the least excuse for staying, her expression crumpled and with a sob she turned and buried her face in her hands on the arm of the chair, her body shaking.

"Oh, look here," he began, half rising, dropping back again, then getting up quickly and going over to her. "I'm terribly sorry. I've upset you. I shouldn't have said such things."

She fished round to a pocket in her frock for a handkerchief and the sobs and half-suppressed cries continued. Desperately he looked round the room, at the open windows where the darkness pressed heavily and at the thin transparent curtains screening off the hall. He tried to listen above the sobs for any sound of the steward-boy returning under the mistaken impression that they wanted more drinks. He went through the curtains and into the hall, where there was an open door leading into the back compound. But the only sound was of

voices coming from somewhere that he took to be the boys' quarters away at the back. He returned to the lounge. The boy would not come unless called. Rita had not changed her position. Her head was still face downwards on the arm of the chair, her hair falling loosely across her neck and shoulders. The convulsive sobbing did not cease.

There was surely something one could do. Again he gave a glance round the room. He put a hand on her shoulder and went down beside her.

"Rita," he said, "it's all right. You'll be better in a minute. What's wrong?"

He could feel her shaking under his hand and he pressed more firmly to try and steady her. But he realised it was hopeless. The attack must pass in its own time. It was the accumulation of months, the breakdown which had never been very far away. All the pent-up emotion had at last broken through and out it now came in choking sobs and moans of acute distress.

At the end of it all she might be seriously ill. But the doctor was forty miles away at Adantakrom. There was no one on the ridge who could be of use, except those who had cars. They could run her in to the hospital at Andantakrom, they would do so with great readiness and expedition. Tewkes, he believed, was at present in Nyankwa and he had a fast car. He would lose no time. He would show matchless resource and efficiency. It might come to that.

"Rita," he continued urgently. "Can you hear me? Your father's got to know about this. He can't possibly go on if he knows—if he knows how you really feel."

There was a movement beneath the mass of straggling hair which he could only interpret as a shake of the head.

"Can I get you anything?" he asked.



She raised herself slowly from the arm of the chair and lay back against the cushions in an exhausted state. Her face was pale and tear-stained,

He seized her hand and pressed it.

"Rital!" he burst out. "I—I——" but there came no answering pressure and her eyes had a distant look. "I'd do anything for you," he concluded lamely.

He stood up. "I'll be getting along, then, if you're sure there isn't anything you want."

"I'm all right." She dragged herself up from the chair and stumbled so that he had to hold her.

"I'm all right," she insisted. "I'm sorry I've made such a scene. I'm all right now, really."

He let go her arm. "It's been all my fault. I shouldn't have come here. I've upset you. I'm very sorry. I didn't mean to."

•They went slowly into the hall and towards the open front door. He took another look at her. She ought not to be left. But she had servants, there was a telephone in the house.

"Good night," he said cheerfully, stepping out into the drive. "Look after yourself."

"Philip!" The exclamation halted him. Under the light over the door her face was still white, but her eyes had recovered their intensity. "You mustn't stay in Nyankwa. It's an evil place. It's not for you. You're too—too—— It'll drag you down, ruin you. It ruins everybody. Can't you see that? It corrupts. My father—Hobden—— Why don't you leave before it's too late?"

Her taut expression, with dark vertical lines down the centre of her forehead, marked the insistence behind her words.

"Yes," he said, trying to humour her. "You're right in some ways. Things have been happening lately——" He

managed to smile. "I shall probably have to leave soon anyway."

For a moment he lingered. But before she could say any more he had forced himself to turn away and was walking quickly up the darkened drive.

## XIX

IN the dim illumination of half a dozen pressure lamps the Grand Evening Dress Dance given by the Progressive Youth Association in aid of the 'Save Our Soil' Fund was well under way. Part of the football field on the edge of the town had been fenced off with palm branches, tarpaulins had been spread on the ground to make some sort of a floor, and strings of flags of all the nations ran from the corners to a pole stuck in an old tar-barrel in the centre. To the harsh, blaring accompaniment of the Forest Reef Brass Band the dancers whirled and jerked and gyrated to the fast tempo of the first High Life of the evening. There had been waltzes, foxtrots and blues, and very carefully the band had accentuated the time and played the right notes, while the dancers had executed their steps with painstaking accuracy. But now all restraint and methodical calculation were cast aside. "Take your partners for the High Life." Three tremendous bangs on the drum had brought everybody on to the floor and they flung themselves with gusto into the dance whose own peculiar rhythm they had learnt on their mothers' backs. As the couples came up to the band, where the light was strongest, the ladies' dresses gleamed out in bright silks and taffetas, rising and falling in wide sweeps, while the faces of their partners appeared shining and grinning out of the darkness. Again and again the music was punctuated by a repetition of those first three ear-splitting beats which acted like an injection of fresh energy into the dancers, who, bobbing and twisting in the half-light, were like the moving parts of a great

complicated machine driven by an inexhaustible force.

The cause for which the dance was being given made Fenton's presence somewhat anomalous, but in the Trading Corporation's store that morning little Mr. Essuman had pressed a ticket upon him, and the prospect of a lonely Saturday evening in the bungalow—his lamp had now given up completely—had induced him to accept. Mr. Essuman had refused to take his five shillings. "You will come as our guest. We shall be very pleased. It is going to be grand, you know. Very very." He was all grins and twinkles and quick little gestures. "Plenty of fine ladies. They are coming from Adantakrom and Kurakessie, even. We shall enjoy. You would like two tickets—one for the lady?"

It had been easier to take the extra ticket than to demur, but it had remained in his pocket. This was not a dance to which one could ask Rita Van Huyt, especially as Madam Amelia figured prominently as one of the M.C.s. In the morning Rita had answered cheerfully enough his telephone enquiry into how she felt, and he had said, "That's good," and put the receiver down with a promptness which denoted plainly that he was not soliciting another invitation to the house. There was, after all, nothing more they could usefully discuss. They had reached the limits of their respective territories and they could now no more than look at each other from opposite banks of the stream. She might get to hear he had been to this dance. That would show her how little effect her final appeal had made. It was a thought which he could pass off with a shrug as he watched the surge of life on the dance floor and felt response stirring within himself to the restless rhythm. He could send her interest in him spinning away like a foreign coin which was now worthless because she would so soon be going. Probably they would not meet

again. He would not join the little cluster of Europeans that would no doubt gather on the station platform to see her off. He knew how they regarded her. He knew how she regarded them. There would be too much simulation on both sides.

He had pushed through the people who crowded round the narrow entrance in the fence of palm leaves and who were hopping and dancing in native style to the sound of the music within. He had caught a glimpse of Braima Donga's granddaughter in her big floppy turban of blue cloth, and she had paused in her game of dancing and hand-clapping with other children to give him a wave, with palm turned outwards and fingers extended in the way common to African children. The gesture was hesitant and her smile a little doubtful as if she were not quite sure of getting a response. But when he returned the smile she laughed delightedly and so did the children with her.

Near the band sat the chief and half a dozen of his elders, dignified figures, but still and expressionless like mummies. They had come to show their support for the cause, but their full ceremonial robes, the only native costumes there, were an anachronism against the black & white evening jackets and ballroom dresses which passed continually before them. The same light which fell on the richly-woven pattern of their cloths struck brassy gleams from the band's instruments and showed up the green and gold-brocaded uniforms of the bandsmen. Not that the band was as smart as all that. Their page-boy caps were pushed a little too far back on their heads and their trumpets and trombones were seen on closer inspection to be dented and tarnished. Under the influence of bottles of beer passed hastily round one to another during the intervals some of the players had loosened their tight-fitting collars, while the conductor, distinguished by a

peaked cap, Sam Browne belt and gold epaulettes, wiped his face from time to time with a large yellow duster which was to be seen hanging down from his trouser pocket whenever he raised his arms for a *crescendo*.

For the first time Fenton seemed to feel Nyankwa, to be right in the heart of it. The rapid jerky rhythm of the drums beating in his ears, the twisting, loose-jointed bodies and lightning footwork of the dancers, the dark faces laughing in complete abandon to the enjoyment of the moment, all inspired him with an answering elation, an urge to participate. Here was life, not a dull affair moulded by convention, but new, arresting, a bubbling-up of energy. The spirit which animated these people was the one which had reached out to him in London and given him a strange quiver of anticipation when West Africa was mentioned. Now he was here and in the very midst of it.

The pace of the music did not slacken, and as the dancers came up from the dark end of the enclosure he watched them closely, trying to discover some system in their movements. He could not resist the thought, that this dance had first been performed with bare feet round the staring figure in the fetish grove. Thus might they have celebrated their emergence from the ground, just as they were now celebrating the case which was to restore Nyankwa's power. The present celebration was in modern dress, but the Nyankwas were still close to their origins. The dance was a throw-back to an early stage in the development of the human race, and it was going on now before him, before his very eyes.

The appeal was insidious. No wonder Rita had been so insistent that he should leave. She could view all this only with disgust as something sub-human, these wriggling bodies. She had fought Nyankwa and failed and she hated to see

anyone else coming to terms with it. But one had to have some interest in life and that interest Fenton had found in Nyankwa, which had given him his first chance to make something of himself. Rita herself might have provided such an interest. To live for that girl! He clenched his hands. It was a fantastic daydream and now, as before, he clamped down on his feelings and refused to let them race ahead to the one inevitable conclusion. If he allowed himself to hope that he could ever marry Rita Van Huyt he would be tormenting himself to no purpose. Anyway, he had no choice in the matter. She was going and he could not follow her. He would land up in England with nothing. He would be no better than a tramp at her door.

What he had to do was to make a fresh start. Nyankwa remained, or it might one day be Sobosso if he ever moved up on the hill, and he could go ahead in dealing with these people according to his own inclinations. He was severed from the club and all it stood for, and there would be no Rita to hold him back with her Good Samaritan appeals. And the first thing he would do in making this fresh start would be to seek out Davis and offer to help him all he could. He could admit to himself now that all his previous arguments against meeting Davis's request had been special pleading. He could manage to assist him somehow. He knew that in some ways this would be a weak surrender, a kind of buying himself back into Davis's favour, but if he wanted to get on terms with the people some concessions would be necessary.

But Davis was not to be seen tonight. When the High Life ended with a great crash of drums and cymbals and the gentlemen were escorting their partners back to the tables and taking leave of them with bows—it was an odd reversion to

formality after the preceding frenzy—Fenton looked anxiously round; walking past and searching each table in turn.

“Good evening, sir,” said Willie Essuman, smiling up at him from a near-by chair. “You would like to sit down? You will take some drink?”

“Well—thanks, I will, if you don’t mind.” He sat down at the table and watched Essuman pick up a half-empty bottle of beer and fill a glass which had clearly been used before.

“I hope you are enjoying the function?”

“Function? Oh yes, pretty well, thanks. I’m really looking for Davis.”

“I’m afraid he is not here.” Mr. Essuman was genuinely sorry to disappoint him. “He has resigned from the Association, you know.”

“Has he? Why?”

“Ah, well!” said Willie Essuman with a shrug.

“I suppose it’s because he doesn’t agree with this business. I shouldn’t be here myself. After all, you are out to do us down, aren’t you?”

“He can please himself,” said Willie Essuman abruptly. He gave a quick smile. “I don’t think I have seen you on the floor, sir?”

“Not me,” said Fenton, looking round. Davis’s absence gave him a sense of frustration, of having missed an opportunity. He wanted so much to act on his decision while it was freshly made. But he would see him in the office on Monday.

There were two girls sitting at the table and they giggled as Fenton caught their eyes.

“I beg your pardon,” said Mr. Essuman, jumping up. “Miss Comfort Amankwah and Miss Felicia Mensah. Mr. Fenton, manager of the Sobosso Mining Company.”



The girls giggled again as Fenton took their limp hands. There were the beginnings of an awkward pause, but before it could develop another woman, stout, spectacled, smiling jovially, sat down at the table with a rustle of silk from her red and black dress.

"Madam Amelia!" exclaimed Willie Essuman in delighted tones. He looked at Fenton. "If you don't know Madam Amelia you have not been in Nyankwa five minutes."

"You are Mr. Fenton, of course," said Madam Amelia, breaking into a laugh. "I am too pleased to meet you. All this time you never visit my establishment. We have special terms for bachelors, you know. We darn socks, mend shirts, sew buttons, all these things. You must give us trial. Have you been dancing?"

Her voice was lilting and good-humoured, her manner perfectly assured, and there was a friendly smile on her dark face. In spite of himself Fenton smiled back.

"Dancing is not my strong point," he said.

"Is that so?" Shrilly Madam Amelia laughed out again. "All white men like our African dances too much. Mr. Mackinnon, Mr. Williams, Mr. Bull they always come. But late, when they have finished their chop. Mr. Mackinnon dances the High Life fine. It is not difficult, you know. You would like a partner?"

"No, thanks. I really do prefer to watch."

"Oh! You are too shy. The next dance is quickstep, I think."

The next dance was quickstep and before two or three bars could be played Willie Essuman had risen to his feet with an "Excuse me, sir," and taken one of the girls on to the floor. A moment later a young man from the next table in a tail-coat, white waistcoat and white gloves came up, bowed briskly

and took away the other girl. Fenton and Madam Amelia were left alone.

A few weeks before he would have withdrawn hastily from such a situation. But its effect upon him now was one of interest. He studied her. She was about forty and there was a look of character about her thick-lipped mouth and in the eyes behind the spectacles which had been entirely absent in the two smirking girls. She wore a gold necklace and pendant—product of those erstwhile deposits at the source of the Sansu River?—and her manner had a certain boisterous charm which was quite uninhibited. She very soon moved up into the chair beside him which Willie Essuman had vacated and leaning forward, beaming and full of friendly approach, asked him how he liked Nyankwa, whether he kept well, whether he liked his work and other similar questions.

"The people like you," she declared. "You know, some white men are not good with our people at all. There was Mr. Hobden. He had very quick temper. Yes! He nearly had strike. But you are different. We hope you will stay."

"Thanks very much," he said. It was extraordinary how often in this country one was continually hearing different views on the same facts. Gerard had said Hobden was the best man they had. Stood no nonsense, probably. "But with this case coming on no one knows what is going to happen."

"That is all politics. For me, I get no time for politics. I am too busy with my establishment. These two girls here—you like their dresses?"

"Yes, they're very fine."

"I make them," said Madam Amelia with satisfaction. "But the business brings me one hell of trouble. I hope soon you will marry Miss Rita and then I can go back to my lovely husband."

For a moment he could only stare. Then he laughed.

"I'm afraid I shall never marry Miss Rita."

"So? You don't like her?"

"Of course I like her. But—well, she's not for me, that's all. And she's leaving in a few days, anyway."

"Is that so?" Madam Amelia's interest was keen. "She's going, eh? I don't know. To Englan'?"

"Yes. Things will then be as they were before, won't they?"

He spoke with some bitterness, expecting to see in her every sign of exultation. But Madam Amelia's manner was curiously restrained.

"She must be very unhappy," she said. "She takes things too serious. I hope in Englan' she will find some good husband."

"Don't you worry about her. She'll be all right. They'll be queueing up two a penny." He watched her for a moment. "Did she really beat you up?"

Madam Amelia lowered her head, shaking it and chuckling.

"She has very strong mind. Very strong altogether. The ship was early, you see, and she did not send my husband telegram. I think maybe she wanted to give him surprise. So when she came she met me in the house. She asked me my business." There were more headshakes and chuckles.

"So you had a set-to, did you?"

"Of course we did not fight," said Madam Amelia, acknowledging that that would have been bad form between ladies, "but I could see that I could not stay. She has very strong mind. . . . My husband is going with her, or——?"

"She is going alone."

He glanced round. Approaching the table in single file along the edge of the dance-floor, pausing frequently to give way to the dancers, were Dave Mackinnon in grey flannel

trousers and a tweed jacket of loud check, Williams in an open shirt and wearing no coat at all, and Police Superintendent Tewkes, well-groomed as ever, in a suit of grey palm beach. Fenton saw them with misgiving. He was enjoying this dance. At that moment little Essuman passed with his partner and gave him a grinning, sideways bow before whirling off into a turn into the midst of the other dancers. Madam Amelia was quickly on her feet to greet the visitors from the ridge. But they hesitated and had a short consultation among themselves. Fenton saw them looking at him doubtfully. Williams seemed especially anxious to choose another table. But finally they came forward.

"Good evening, Madam," said the bank manager amiably. "Ye're fatter than ever."

She laughed. "Is that so? I was just telling Mr. Fenton that you dance the High Life fine. I hope you will give us exhibition. We are awarding prize to the best couple, you know."

"It depends on me partner," said Dave. He spoke and selected his chair with a slow, over-deliberation which suggested that the drinks he now ordered from one of the small boys who came hurrying forward were not the first of the evening.

As they sat down Fenton received from Dave Mackinnon a "Good evening, Mr. Fenton, ye're quite a stranger these days," from Williams a stony glance and from Tewkes a "Good evening, old boy," which was undeniably forced. His own muttered acknowledgements were no more sincere. The spell of his enjoyment was broken. It was like another session at the club. When the quickstep ended and Willie Essuman and the two girls returned, the three new arrivals rose chivalrously to vacate their chairs, but Madam Amelia as M.C.

had some more chairs brought up very quickly. The circle round the table widened. When the small boy returned with a tray of glasses and half a dozen frothing beer bottles it looked like being quite a party.

Fenton looked at his watch. Half-past eleven. He did not feel now that he wanted to stay much longer. The station-master had told him that the goods train would come through at half after midnight to pick up the wagons and he thought of going down there. It was some time since he had checked up on the new night-watchman and anyway he liked seeing the train come through at night. There might not be many more opportunities. From the dance he could cut across the football field and through the timber yards. It was only a few minutes.

Dave Mackinnon was in low conversation with one of the girls. She kept lowering her eyelashes and breaking into self-conscious laughter. He was perhaps persuading her to partner him in the next dance, which, Madam Amelia declared, viewing proudly the company around her, was to be another High Life. Williams sat in sour-faced silence, a kind of suppressed irritation, as if he resented having been brought to the dance at all, while Tewkes, after inserting a cigarette into his holder, looked searchingly round at the neighbouring tables.

"What's the latest info?" he asked Fenton, who was immediately beside him.

"About what?"

"There's something screwy about this place. Nyankwa, I mean. Got any clue to what's going on?"

Fenton wondered whether he knew about Van Huyt's part in the affair, but felt no disposition to tell him.

"This is a black man's country," went on Tewkes, "so you can never be sure what they're up to. But I don't like it.

Something phoney at the back of this case somewhere. Can't put my finger on it though. Trouble is I can only be here about one day in seven. I had the chief and some of his moth-eaten old elders in my office this morning and said I hoped I could rely on their co-operation in keeping the public peace."

He looked at Fenton meaningly, in obvious invitation for his co-operation as well. Again there was the implication that they were all in this together against a common danger.

"I wouldn't call the Krontihene a moth-eaten old elder," said Fenton.

"Wouldn't you, old boy? You know these chums, of course. I don't, yet. But there they are, been meeting every night for a week, so my scouts tell me. Together with that little runt Komfo Kabachi, and he never leaves his village unless there's something afoot. I'd like to whistle in to that village one day. Might learn a lot."

"You will need helmets and rifles if you go in there," put in Williams in his quick Welsh patter. "We tried to send a sanitary gang to clean up the place once and they were not popular, I assure you."

"Mr. Williams," began the bank manager, whose slow Gaelic drawl was getting a little thick. "This is respectable company and——"

"Respectable company, is it?" Williams retorted. "If this is respectable company give me——"

"—and we don't want to hear about sanitary gangs—an' drains—an' nuisances—an' all the rest o' the Health Department's stock-in-trade. I'll be obliged if ye'll just put a drop o' beer in that glass an' pass it across. I've almost persuaded this young lady to give me the next dance and she needs just that something extra to bring her to the proper pitch o' resolution. That's right, lass, drink up now, all for the love of the P.Y.A."

Leaning forward, he glared round the table in red-faced defiance. "Who the devil are the P.Y.A., anyway? Madam Amelia, if that band of yours does not strike up in just one more minute from now I'll go an' bang on the drums myself. Seen the old man lately?"

In the silence which followed this remark Willie Essuman whispered excitedly to Fenton:

"Mr. Mackinnon never misses our African dances, you know. He is very sociable, isn't it?"

Fenton turned to Tewkes.

"Don't you think it's time he went home? Before he——?"

But Williams overheard him.

"You hear that, don't you, Dave? Our friend here thinks it's time you went home, he thinks you've been drinking too much, you see."

"Aye! He does, does he?" Mackinnon put his glass down on the table with elaborate care. "Let me just tell ye, Mr. Fenton, that I've been in this country in general, and in Nyankwa in particular, longer than—before you were born."

"Whenever that might have been," said Williams with a look which gave his words all possible significance.

Fenton knocked over the table that stood between them, and the beer bottles went crashing down, spouting their contents in all directions. The women jumped up with a shriek, catching up their dresses. Fenton faced Williams who had started to his feet with the rest.

"You dirty little Welshman," he said and slammed his fist straight at Williams's moustache.

Williams fell back into his chair. There was an exclamation from Tewkes. From the near-by tables there was an array of staring black faces and people began getting up and gathering round, chattering excitedly. Williams was slumped dazedly

in his chair. His face flushing hotly, Fenton pushed past the people. Mid-way across the floor he glanced back, half expecting to see Tewkes coming after him or blowing a whistle or something. But the Police Superintendent was in the middle of the crowd, waving his arms at the people to stand back. Fenton reached the entrance, where other people moved aside with awed looks to let him through. Outside he switched on a small torch which he had brought in his pocket and was soon walking rapidly along the path across the football field.

He had one urge and that was to get away. Once he looked back, but there was no sign of a pursuer and all he could see was the blur of light above the enclosure where the band was again blaring and thumping. Everywhere else the dark silence of the night was unbroken and he could feel rather than see the heavy mass of trees a couple of hundred yards to the right which blanketed off the fetish village from the town. He was sweating and trembling and as he walked he rubbed his knuckles where the impact of the blow still smarted. He had been a fool, yet he knew that the exhibition he had made of himself, which would keep the whole of Nyankwa, black and white alike, talking for days, was but the culmination of a process which had begun almost on the day of his arrival when Williams had first addressed him. It was his pro-African sympathies, expressed in his dealings with Williams's enemies the P.Y.A. and in his employment of Hobden's boy, plus—with all that—the possibility of his being a rival for Rita's affections, which had made Williams loathe him to an ungovernable degree. A climax of some kind had been bound to arise and now Fenton had hit him, thus admitting for all to see the force of the insult and his own sensitivity. Thoughts raged in his mind against himself, Nyankwa and everybody in it. They had him now, these people on the ridge, they had



him in a position where, with full freedom of conscience, they could set him down as a hyper-sensitive misfit who was beyond their power, anybody's power, to assist; and thus would he be regarded wherever in the colony he subsequently appeared.

In the yard—his yard; that at least still remained—there was not a sound. The linxite wagons waited with heavy immobility. His torch moved dimly over their iron-studded sides. In a few minutes the yard would come alive to the clatter and squeak of buffers and couplings, the hiss of steam, and the shouts of the linesmen. He never failed still to get a thrill of achievement, of something solid and well done, from such scenes, especially at night when the wagons rolled away into the darkness as part of an organisation which was never at rest.

He was expecting the watchman Kwesi Amma to appear, but was relieved when he did not do so. He was probably asleep, thus meriting instant dismissal, but just then Fenton was averse to meeting anyone. He put out his torch and slipped it back in his pocket. He wished he could always be like this, alone, unseen, where no one could get at him. Coming to this country had seemed to offer a new beginning, but all he had in the result was a job of doubtful duration, a reputation for being a peculiar person which would follow him everywhere, and a nodding acquaintance with people like Davis, Willie Essuman and now Madam Amelia.

He walked slowly past the wagons towards the farther end of the yard. As he approached the reserve pile of linxite a lantern appeared from the other side of it. He remembered Gerard's words about the pilfering of linxite and shouted. There were some muttered exclamations and the man carrying the lantern started to run, followed by three or four other shadowy figures, one of whom seemed to be carrying a sack over his shoulder. They came out from behind the linxite and

began running away from the wagons along the railway line. Fenton shouted again and went in pursuit. Sudden energy possessed him and he ran recklessly along the cindered track, expecting any moment to trip over the sleepers and fall flat on his face. But he didn't care. He wanted to get among them, to beat them up for trespassing in his yard. Then he would beat up Kwesi Amma for not being on duty. He was in the mood for beating up people tonight. The man with the sack was falling behind. Fenton was within ten paces of him when there came the whistle of the train approaching round the bend, its searchlight focused on the line and reddened smoke curling from its funnel.

One by one the men jumped off the embankment into the unseen verge of thick undergrowth. The man with the sack was the last to jump, but he missed his footing and Fenton had a vague fleeting glimpse of his body rolling down the bank, his grip on the sack loosened. Fenton followed and also stumbled, falling full length in the rough, thorny vegetation while the train rumbled by overhead, the black faces of the driver and fireman gleaming in the light of the cab. The procession of wagons and vans went clanking past, brakes squealing, and presently the train had halted in the station three or four hundred yards away, where Fenton, breathing heavily as he got to his feet, saw the red light at the rear of the guard's van showing still and solitary.

The men he had been chasing had disappeared, but after his fall he no longer felt the same determination to pursue them. He must have been crazy ever to start. They could have turned on him in the darkness and slit him up with impunity. They might return and still do so, for no shouts for assistance could carry above the noise of the engine blowing off steam, and the banging and clattering of the shunting operations

would soon begin. With some idea of climbing back on to the embankment and retracing his steps he fumbled for his torch and shone it around, looking for an easy way up. The beam showed the sack lying in the grass several feet away. He went nearer and bent over it. But after a single brief look he started back in horror and snapped off the light. The sack was marked with dark stains and at the open end was a child's head with contorted features and eyes that stared sightlessly.

Dizzily he reeled back against the embankment while all power of movement drained from him. Twisted and staring as it was, he knew that face. He had seen it two, three hours earlier when it had smiled on him outside the dance enclosure. Braima Donga's granddaughter. He began shivering in a cold sweat and he gripped the stones behind him as if they were his last hold on consciousness. He could not reason at all. He could only stand transfixed, fearful to move even if he had been able, while the darkness pressed upon him, seeming to come right up to his very eyelids until he wondered if he had not been struck blind. He closed his eyes tightly and opened them, but the darkness was no less intense and he had to force himself to turn his head towards the station, where lanterns were moving along the side of the train and there sounded the impact of buffers as the shunting began preparatory to connecting up the linxite wagons. But all that was part of a world a million miles away, a world to which he had himself belonged up to a few minutes ago and which, even if he got back to it, would seem unreal with his present knowledge. The reality was at his feet. That was what happened while the band played and people danced or went about their occupations. The men he had chased—they had been coming up the path from the fetish grove; and he shuddered and was

nearly sick at the realisation of what they must have been doing down there before that staring stone figure by the tree where the soul of the Nyankwas was held to be enshrined.

Life here in Nyankwa was what he had wanted to know. He had wanted to probe to the bottom of it, to know what really went on behind the façade of black skins, crumbling houses and silent forest. He had been fascinated, and this was where the mystery had led him, to the pit of hell itself. It was the revelation of an inconceivable evil which struck away the basis, faith in Nyankwa, on which his own life here had rested. Now he knew. He had *seen*. All he had so far done in Nyankwa, his friendship with Davis, his meeting with the Progressive Youth Association, his sympathies expressed on numerous occasions, appeared to him as the merest superficialities. Here, close at hand in the undergrowth where he did not dare to shine his torch a second time, was the truth, the product of strange and terrible beliefs that reached back to the very beginnings of time. He was an eye-witness of evil as yet unfathomed. And even while he was still aghast at the appalling nature of his discovery, the awareness grew within him that it was he and no other who had been given the knowledge of this event. It was a perverted sense of privilege, as if he had been initiated into some dread mystery. He knew more than them all now. He had plunged into the depths.

Paralysis still gripped him. The perpetrators must have gone down one of the paths leading into the great curtain of blackness which screened the fetish village, but they would not be far away. They would have edged back and would now be watching and listening, ready to spring upon him at the first doubtful movement. They could not afford to let him get away. He stole another glance towards the station, which was only a few hundred yards distant and where the original part

of the train had now been shunted back to clear the top end of the siding, so that the linxite wagons could be drawn on to the main line and connected. But he would not be allowed to get so far. Again he pressed himself back against the stones of the embankment, drawing what assurance he could from their rough unyielding surface.

He would have to run for it. He realised this with sickening dread. He could wait through the four or five hours till daylight, but they wouldn't allow him to wait. They would steal up and cut him down where he stood, while it was still dark. The only chance was to get on to the line and run for the yard. If he got as far as that he would probably be safe. His heart began to pound in anticipation and his hands began to feel among the stones behind him for a foothold. He wondered whether he would be capable of the effort and kept putting off the final decision from minute to minute, while his eyes searched the darkness. The train's departing whistle startled him and he watched the red light on the guard's van move slowly away down the line with a feeling that he was being deserted, that this was the last thing he would see. Suddenly he turned, placed his foot among the stones, and jumped up on the embankment. Then he was running, running for his life, his eyes hard on the receding red light as if it were sanctuary.

## XX

IT was three o'clock when Davis heard the hammering on the compound door. For a while he lay listening. There was urgency in the rapidly repeated blows. At last he wrapped his cloth around him and went out into the empty courtyard. He drew back the bolts and at once the door was pushed violently against him and across the threshold darted the dwarfish figure of Komfo Kabachi, the fetish priest.

"Yow Boma!" he exclaimed. "Where is Yow Boma? I must see him!"

His eyes were staring and he clutched impulsively at Davis's cloth.

"He is asleep," replied Davis, wondering at Komfo Kabachi's excited manner. "But what's happened? Why do you want him at this time?"

Without answering the fetish priest went hurrying across the compound and began beating on the Krontihene's door. In the shadows his form could no longer be distinguished, but his fear-stricken voice rang out in the night above his blows on the door.

"Yow Boma! Yow Boma! I must see you. Yow Boma, wake up and let me in."

Other members of the household in their various rooms must have heard him, but no one looked out. When episodes of this kind happen at night, wise people keep out of sight. Davis re-bolted the door of the compound and stepped back into his room. He opened his wooden shutter and looked in the direction of the Krontihene's door, which was apparently soon

opened, for the knocking and shouting ceased. Davis continued to watch. Something had happened to bring the fetish priest here in this manner. Previous visits had always been expected, for it was the Krontihene himself who at the appointed time went across the compound to open the door. Things were happening in Nyankwa. For months he had been aware of strange undercurrents and no one any longer seemed to have any sense. He had given up the P.Y.A. in disgust. In throwing themselves into the 'Save Our Soil' campaign its members had behaved no more rationally than the illiterate stool attendants who chanted *Yeil Yeil* to whatever was said by the chief's linguist at public meetings. He had told them so, told them of the long futile litigation and the crippling debts which could be the only possible outcome, and been rewarded with nothing but abuse, told to join his white friends and go off to England; while the dark and sinister side to it all was represented by the conversation he had had with Tinga, who ever since had been complaining of fevers and pains in the joints and had never left the compound. He remained huddled in his rags under the overhang of roof by the Krontihene's rooms, fed on scraps of food which the women took him sometimes. Davis also used to take him some food, but could never get him to say more. There was always someone around who would have overheard.

A slit of light was showing under the Krontihene's door, but half an hour passed and still Komfo Kabachi did not reappear. Davis resisted the temptation to approach the door and listen. It would be too risky. Now that Fenton had declined to lend him the money, his uncle was once more his only hope of getting to England away from all this madness. He was determined on one more appeal and would do nothing to prejudice it.

When at last the Krontihene's door opened it was Yow Boma himself who came across the compound towards Davis's room. Davis lay down on his bed. The first few knocks on the door he ignored. "I have something to say to you," said the Krontihene when finally he got up. "Come into my room."

Davis followed him. In Tinga's corner there was a slight stirring of rags as they went into the Krontihene's room, where a single lantern, turned low, burned on a table by the wall. Near it sat Komfo Kabachi, whose eyes in his wizened little face shuttled nervously to and fro between Davis and his uncle.

Yow Boma shut the door. His face was harder set than usual. Readjusting his dark-coloured cloth he sat down on the divan and signalled Davis to a chair. The heavy calm of his manner contrasted with the fetish priest's twitches and fidgetings.

"I have decided that the time has come for you to go to England," he said quietly. "When this case is over the Sobosso Mining Company will go and there will be no more work for you to do here. So it is good if you go to England and begin your studies."

Davis said nothing, but watched his uncle closely. It was what he had been waiting to hear for months, what he had despaired of ever hearing; already the Krontihene's room seemed still more confined against the wide horizons that were rapidly opening up before him, yet he fought to control his jubilation. Promises had been made to him before, and why should they be repeated now at three in the morning in the presence of Komfo Kabachi who sat squirming in his chair in obvious impatience?

"I shall be grateful," was all he said at last.

"The white man Fenton was in the yard tonight," the



Krontihene continued. "He saw Komfo Kabachi and some of the other priests——"

"I was not there," screamed Komfo Kabachi. "I tell you I was not there! They were my assistants. I sent them there to make the medicine. When they returned to the village they told me about the white man. Myself I was not there. If the white man says I was there it is lies."

"Tomorrow morning," Yow Boma went on evenly, "he will tell his white friends. If these strangers from across the sea would mind their own affairs it would be better, and things would go on more smoothly. As it is, I want you to take him a small present."

From the folds of his cloth the Krontihene produced a packet of bank-notes. With deepening dread Davis watched him.

"You will take him a message," Yow Boma continued, "that we are very sorry for the trouble he had tonight. We hope he will not find it necessary to mention the matter to anybody, because he has always been our good friend. And you will give him this small present to mark our regrets." He put the notes down on a table beside him. "You had better go to his house now. Daylight will soon be upon us."

"Yes, go quickly," urged Komfo Kabachi. "Go very quickly. He is in his house now. He went straight there. Some of my assistants followed him. He has not yet gone to see his white friends because he had a big quarrel with them tonight at the dance and knocked one of them down. But tomorrow he will change his mind and tell them all. You must take the message to him now."

They both looked at him in the murky light, the fetish priest white-eyed and leaning forward, the Krontihene grave but relaxed in the corner of the divan.

"You have nothing to fear," said the Krontihene. "You are

his friend. He will listen to you. It is very fortunate you are on such good terms."

In Davis revulsion was welling up as if to choke him. At the fetish grove tonight something devilish had happened, the nature of which he did not dare to enquire. But Tinga had given him all too obvious a hint. This was the night on which they had made their sacrifice. Somehow Fenton had got to know about it—had his unaccountable interest in native customs taken him into the fetish grove?—and now he, Davis, was being requested to bribe him into silence. He understood the position clearly, and he also understood the reasons for his uncle's promise. Of course they would want to get him out of the country now. He knew too much. They would push him off on the first boat. He looked down at his black hands and then at the faces opposite. They were all Africans, bound together by indissoluble ties. Ever since coming to Nyankwa he had lived in fear that sooner or later he would be involved in a situation of this kind, when everything he had learned would be hopelessly compromised. He remembered those lectures at Latuba College, all skilfully designed to give him pride in his country's history and culture; and now he was being implicated in a piece of primitive barbarism. He was implicated whether he obeyed their request or not. The very knowledge made him an accomplice; and he was being asked to lower himself, before Fenton, to the level of utmost degradation. Disgust at the whole foul business got the better of him.

"Why do you trouble me with these matters?" he demanded. "I helped you with Kwesi Amma. Isn't that enough?"

"Yes, yes," said Komfo Kabachi quickly. "That was very good. Since Kwesi Amma became watchman there has been no trouble. He has always kept out of the way when anything

was coming on. The white man listened to you then and he will listen to you again. You are his friend."

"He will not listen. White men do not take bribes. Rather he will report me to the police. They will accuse me of helping you in this—in this fetish business."

"It is true that white men do not take bribes," said Yow Boma smoothly. "But this case is different. The Sobosso Mining Company will soon close. Your friend will then have no work and he will be glad to have the money. You will persuade him."

With a loose end of his cloth Davis wiped the sweat from his face.

"I cannot do it," he said. "It is a bad business. I cannot do it."

"It's just what I said," declared the fetish priest shrilly, with wild gesticulations at Yow Boma. "He is a scholar. These scholars are no good. They are all white men's friends. He will betray us. You must go and see the white man yourself."

"Komfo Kabachi, you talk like an old market-woman. You fear too much or you would not have let the white man leave the place."

"I tell you I was not there," said the fetish priest in another scream. "They were my assistants who had gone to do the work. They came to report to me and when I got there he had gone." His face was twitching and his blinking eyes passed rapidly between Davis and the Krontihenc in a desperate appeal to be believed.

"You are talking lies," said Yow Boma with a contemptuous glance. "There was plenty of time. You feared and so he escaped and now we have all this trouble."

But the fetish priest continued his gesticulations.

"It is bad to kill a white man. It causes too much palaver.

And perhaps he had a gun. Hobden had a gun. And the police would have come to our village with guns and shot many people. They would have destroyed the fetish. The Sobosso people would then win the case. But now we have some good medicine. We took it away when the white man left." He gripped the Krontihene's shoulder with a skinny hand. "We must persuade him," he said.

"Go now," the Krontihene told Davis. "Here is the money. One hundred pounds. Go to his house now, while it is still dark and no one will see you."

"He will not accept the money. I know he will not accept it." Desperately Davis fought against the forces which were getting him in their grip. "It is impossible."

"You will have to persuade him," said the Krontihene imperturbably. "It would be a very bad thing if he began saying there had been human sacrifice in Nyankwa. The police would make too much trouble. We should have to give them too many presents and it would be very expensive. I doubt if I should be able to send you to England as I promised. And the old man with the gold who is helping us with this case—he would be very angry, and he might not help us any more. If so the case with the Sobossos will also cost me much money and I shall not be able to make you lawyer. And so if you go and persuade your friend that the person he saw tonight was killed by wild animals in the bush it will be better. . . . If you would rather spend your life as a small boy kissing the ground for white men in their offices I shall send another messenger. Tinga perhaps. But you are more likely to be successful because you are his friend."

"You have made these promises before," said Davis in a low voice. His head was bowed. He was going down, down into corruption and savagery. He saw the last few years, ever since

he had gone to Latuba, as a sham. And yet to go on being a clerk—for that they would have been 'a waste.

The Krontihene got up and went to a cupboard, from which he returned with an unopened bottle of gin. Drawing himself to his full height he lowered the cloth from his shoulder and threw the bottle crashing on the concrete floor between the feet of Davis and Komfo Kabachi. They started from their chairs and watched with amazed eyes as the Krontihene, standing erect, declared in a slow, sonorous voice:

"I swear the Great Oath of Nyankwa that if my nephew Davis will persuade the white man not to report this matter I will send him to England to be trained as a lawyer. Let the gods of Nyankwa kill me if I do not send him."

"The—the Great Oath," stammered Komfo Kabachi with an affrighted look. "You have sworn the Great Oath!"

"I have sworn," said Yow Boma solemnly. "The libation is poured. You are the witness. Tomorrow I shall visit the fetish grove and slaughter twenty sheep in accordance with our custom."

Davis stood aghast at his uncle's conduct. That Yow Boma could pay anything more than lip-service to these old superstitions was almost past belief. But the solemn deliberation with which he had acted showed that he had not just gone through a form. He felt himself to be as strongly bound as if he had put his seal on a deed of covenant prepared by the lawyers in Kurakessie.

"Go now," he told his nephew. "Already we have lost much time."

He held out the money and dumbly Davis took it. The room was heavy with gin fumes and the smell of burnt kerosene from the lamp. All Nyankwa was conspiring to suffocate him, to smother those ideas of light and progress which he

had once so earnestly absorbed on College Hill. But one had to look out for oneself. One had to adopt the best means ready to hand. After all he was only being asked to take a message. He would make no bones about it. "My uncle has asked me to tell you . . ."

In a few minutes his closely-wrapped figure was hurrying towards the ridge through the deserted streets of Nyankwa, which still reverberated to the sound of drumming from the dance on the football field.

## XXI

SOME two and a half hours earlier Fenton had come stumbling up the steps of his bungalow, locked the door behind him and groped through the unlighted sitting-room to a chair. He dropped down exhausted, conscious only of the fact that he was home, behind a locked door. Soon he began listening, but there was no sound of feet upon the steps and when, on a sudden thought, he rose and looked out of the window there was nothing to be seen but the blurred forms of bushes in the garden below. But there would be watchers. He was convinced that he had been followed, even though he had not heard their bare feet behind him. Somehow he had kept ahead of them on that dash along the line and on the road they had held their hand. He had run as far as he could, then he had walked, then run again, intent only on getting himself behind his own locked door. His heart still pounded, but presently he began to shiver in his sweat-soaked clothes. His pursuers would be outside now and as soon as they thought he had gone to sleep . . . The jalousies could be forced and he had never taken Stanley Bull's advice about burglar-proof window-screens.

Striking a match he lit the hurricane lamp which Nunoo had thoughtfully left on the table against his return. The light was weak, no better than a candle, and it did not reach the full length of the room. But while it burned, he thought, they would be put off by the dull glimmer which would be visible from outside. He slumped back into his chair. Tomorrow, or rather today, was Sunday. He wouldn't have to go to the yard.

He wouldn't have to go out at all. He wondered whether he could ever bring himself to leave the house again. To face the labourers, Braima Donga—to see the old man getting to his feet for the customary bow—it was a repellent prospect.

Someone would be coming to see him about that fool Williams. Tewkes, perhaps, or more probably Dave Mackinnon, the oldest resident, seeking an amicable settlement. He wouldn't see him. The door would remain locked. Nunoo could say he was ill; and that wouldn't be far wrong, either. He hated the lot of them. They had had a good deal to talk about these last few months, in the evenings outside the club round a table of drinks: Rita and Van Huyt; Hobden's death here in this room in circumstances never satisfactorily explained; his own arrival and curious predilection for Hobden's suspect boy; and now the episode at the dance. And soon there would be the bankruptcy of the Sobosso Mining Company and the revelation of Van Huyt's part in the affair, which could scarcely be concealed much longer. Certainly there was material for many more months of comment and speculation on topics which would be long in tiring. The stories would be handed down from one succession of residents to the next. "That bungalow across there—deserted now—that was Hobden's. We were sitting here when we heard the shot. His steward-boy, of course—though nothing was ever proved. A chap called Fenton went into it afterwards. He was a queer type too. Pro-black, you know. Paid for it in the end, though. Got himself mixed up in a fetish murder. Then got scared and ran. Never reported it till the next day. Then said he couldn't identify the parties. They got at him, if you ask me. Yes, he left soon afterwards. Never heard what happened to him. . . ."

Disappeared off the ship at sea on the way home, thought



Fenton. Lost without trace. No one would care, anyway. That was the advantage of his complete isolation. He could just obliterate himself and no one would be affected in the slightest degree. He didn't fit anywhere. He had tried in the centre of civilisation and he had tried here in Nyankwa. He had staked everything on Nyankwa and Nyankwa had now revealed itself.

No one knew. He treasured that reassurance. His awakening was a secret for himself alone and, unless he began spreading it abroad that he had been in the yard that night, no one else need know of his presence there. He had seen no sign of Kwesi Amma and he did not suppose that the others would be likely to publicise their activities. He had not seen their faces. He could never recognise or describe them, however closely Tewkes might cross-examine him. He wouldn't be believed, of course. Not he, with his reputation. He had been got at by his black friends. That would be the popular assumption. And he had run away too. They would make the most of that. None of them would have run away. Certainly not Tewkes. He would have blown his whistle, fought the gang single-handed until help came, brought them all to justice, done a smart job. He wouldn't have been afraid of a knife in the back. Undoubtedly the club would have much to talk about as the sun went down behind the Nyankwa hills and the great green bowl that was the golf-course lost colour and grew dark.

Well, thought Fenton, as he rose from his chair and began pacing up and down the room, he was damned if he would give them all that satisfaction. He didn't owe them anything. And even if he did, nothing he could say would serve the ends of justice. He had not seen the men's faces. He told himself that again and again. He could not even be sure of the numbers. They had been strung out along the line in the

darkness made still more intense by the tall, looming mass of trees on either side. All he had seen were some vague shapes and a bobbing lantern in the brief pursuit before they had all had to jump off the line. The most zealous police officer could not make much of that.

Tewkes and the rest knew that Nyankwa was bad. They had said so often enough and for that they required no additional evidence. The only effect of Fenton's story would be to reinforce their detestation and contempt for the place. But not for Fenton were the dark doings in the village and fetish grove a matter of hearsay and guesswork. For him Nyankwa had been exposed, visibly, for what it was, there in the half-open sack amid the undergrowth. He was conscious of having obtained a kind of supernatural insight into all that was evil in the primitive instincts of men and that in so doing he had trespassed into knowledge beyond legitimate bounds. He had verged on the other-worldly. It was his own knowledge, which no one would ever think of attributing to him and which he recoiled from ever wanting to share. He wanted to keep it to himself. Once again he had the sense of being privileged. Disgusted and sickened as he was, it crossed his mind that he would like to go amongst Tewkes and Williams and the rest, not to tell them what he had seen, but to feel, in their presence, that he had knowledge beyond their wildest speculations and that, in this respect at least, he was their superior. Rita Van Huyt had also looked into dark depths. But he would not think of Rita Van Huyt now. She would not have run away either.

He dropped back into his chair and sat perfectly still, making no attempt to control the fits of shivering which kept coming over him. He could go on shivering, perhaps he would shiver to death, passing in the process through a delirium when

someone might be able to piece together some sense out of his ravings. They wouldn't hear from him any other way. He was resolved on that. The knowledge was his and he would keep it. Let them find out for themselves. They had found out a good deal about him already. He was not going to aid them to this final exposure.

A soft knock at the door brought him sharply forward. He thought he must have been mistaken, for he had heard no footsteps on the steps outside. But the knock was repeated, still soft and tentative.

"Who's there?" he called. He didn't have to open the door. Whoever it was, he didn't have to open the door.

"Please, sir, I am Davis."

"Davis? What do you want?"

"I have come to see you. It is very important."

It was a trap. They had sent Davis to get him to open the door. But Davis couldn't be mixed up in this. He at least must be apart from all this savage lunacy. He recalled the first morning when Davis had stood before him in a shine of efficiency and reliability.

"Are you alone?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. Quite alone. It is all right, sir."

Thinking that Davis might have come with some warning he got up to open the door. Davis came in quickly. There was something furtive in the way he slipped across the threshold. For a while they looked at each other. It was the first time Fenton had seen Davis in a native cloth, and its loose dark folds draped over one shoulder had an alien aspect. So did the apprehensive glitter in the African's eyes as he shifted them towards the lamp, a glitter which took Fenton back to the shadowy figures, creatures of the night, whom he had chased along the railway line.

"You had better sit down," said Fenton, turning away. He did not like to look at Davis in this new guise. He could not feel that he was the one who had come to the bungalow so many times before. Hesitantly Davis followed. He was unsteadied by Fenton's pale, taut expression from which every trace of the familiar smile had been extinguished, and by his unnatural stare which was as if what he had recently seen was mirrored perpetually before him. His white evening jacket was crumpled and stained and his hair was lank.

"Why have you come?"

"It was my uncle who said I should come. He said I should bring you a message. My uncle is the head of my family, so when he asks me to do something I have to do it."

Again his eyes glittered in the lamplight as he wavered before Fenton's unyielding gaze. Suddenly Davis was afraid. He could say nothing. The full enormity of what he had come to do was brought home to him. He fixed his eyes on the crescent of flame in the lamp and then at the closed door three or four yards away. He wanted to bolt from the room. He felt that if he once delivered the message he would draw down upon himself a cataclysm. He knew the Bible. If anyone touched the Ark of the Covenant he dropped dead.

It was like that—the violation of an ultimate sanctity.

"I beg leave to go," he said, standing up. But immediately Fenton started forward, and seized his wrist.

"What was the message?" he demanded. Too often he had been robbed of some vital information at the last moment. But not this time.

"Please, it is nothing. I—I can tell you on Monday. Now it is late."

"I want to know now. What was your uncle's message?"

Grimacing, Davis tried to twist himself free. But Fenton

tightened his grasp and took hold of the other arm as well. He glared down at the flattened negro features, hating the white dilated eyes, the broad and quivering nostrils, the out-turned lips. He was aware of a sudden power. He had all Nyankwa in his grip and he could break it. He could feel Davis's wrist and arm straining but he held them with a strength he had not known he possessed. It brought him exultation. He would make Davis talk before he was done. All the pent-up emotion of the last few hours went into the tightness of his grip.

"Tell me," he demanded again. "Why did you come here?"

Davis could read a threat in the glaring eyes and felt the strength which could throw him down and beat or strangle the breath out of him.

"My uncle," he gasped, "hopes you will not report—what you saw tonight."

"Anything else?"

"That was the message, sir."

But Fenton, every nerve alert, had noticed the furtive glance.

"You're lying," he said.

A cry came from Davis as he felt his arm twisted. He gave a look of agonised appeal.

"My uncle also asked me—" the words were being torn from him—"to give you a hundred pounds——"

He found himself spinning across the room to fall violently against the door. Fenton was leaning back against the table where the lamp was, breathing hard, sweat streaming down his white face.

"Get out!" he shouted. "You're all the same. Get out!"

Davis scrambled out of his way as he strode across and flung open the door.

"Get out," he shouted again. "And leave me alone, the whole damned lot of you."

With a frightened look Davis got across the threshold and at once the door was slammed behind him. For a moment he waited at the top of the steps and then, supporting himself on the banisters, went slowly down.

He did not hurry back to the town. Half-way along the road from Fenton's bungalow he halted and sat down on the bank, bending forward and holding his head in his hands. It was some time before he could think coherently. Then with one hand he felt the hard outline of the notes in the pocket of his shorts beneath his cloth. . . . The idea persisted. He was done with looking to others. Henceforth he must look out for himself.

"Yes," he told his uncle fifteen minutes later. "He took the money."

"So!" said the Krontihene approvingly. "It is what I told you."

Davis was thankful for the strong family sense which made it impossible for Yow Boma to believe that his own nephew had double-crossed him. But he was greatly tempted to leave Nyankwa immediately. He did not doubt that as soon as daylight came Fenton would report the whole matter. The Krontihene would then know that Davis had lied to him and would no longer feel bound by the oath he had sworn. His ensuing anger would be something which Davis did not care to face. There were no passenger trains on Sundays, but it would be possible to get to Latuba by lorry. Once there he could wait with his hundred pounds and get away by the first available ship; and leave Nyankwa behind him for ever.

But Davis had lived in Latuba long enough to know that a passage to England was not to be obtained at a few hours' notice. It might take him two or three weeks and, if Fenton reported, as he must surely do, the attempt to bribe him,

then the police would want to get hold of Davis also. His hasty departure from Nyankwa would lay him open to suspicion. They might even regard him as an accomplice. Davis saw himself being brought back to Nyankwa in handcuffs, a shameful prospect, even if he eventually cleared himself. It would, he decided, be wiser to stay in Nyankwa for a while and if it became necessary he would have to tell the Krontihene that Fenton must have gone to the police despite the fact that he took the money. He believed he could put that one across with fair persuasiveness. And if the police came asking him questions he could deny ever going near Fenton that night. No one else had seen him, the Krontihene and Komfo Kabachi could not afford to give him away, and it would be his word against Fenton's. However little the police might believe him they would not have sufficient evidence for any criminal proceedings against him. Meanwhile the money would remain his and when the affair blew over he could be on his way. He no longer expected any help from his uncle. But he had the means of getting to England and he had no doubt that once he was there opportunities for advancement would present themselves. He did not believe what Fenton had said about the difficulties, for Fenton had merely been making excuses for not lending him money.

Full of confidence in his future he walked out in the town next morning, viewing tolerantly the squalid houses and mean streets which he would not see much longer. He met Tinga coming along on his knees and elbows from that part of the town called the Zongo, where the Dongas and other strangers from the northern provinces all lived. Tinga eased himself back on to his haunches, grinningly touched his white cotton cap and gave Davis a cheerful greeting.

"White man's friend, how are you? For me I am better. My

fever left me last night and today I feel plenty fine. I have been visiting some of my Donga friends. When one is sick one does not hear any news. Nor can one go out begging. So I have been going to see my friends. Nyankwa is now a good place for strangers, don't you think?"

His grin was taunting. Davis could see at once that he had heard Komfo Kabachi's panic-stricken screams last night and had drawn the obvious conclusions. Davis became anxious. One could not be sure which side Tinga would be on. He was not a Nyankwa man and his loyalties must be as twisted as his own body.

"What news have your friends told you?" asked Davis.

"Ah! There is big news in the Zongo today. All Donga people have gone to see Braima Donga, the old man. It is a very pitiful thing. His granddaughter is missing since last night and Braima Donga has asked them all to help in finding her."

"Braima Donga's granddaughter!" Davis felt sick.

"Yes! He is an old man and it is a very sad thing that he should have this trouble. When he saw me he asked for my help also. 'Tinga,' he said, 'you know this town well. You go about plenty. I shall be glad if you will make me a report of anything you hear. Here is some small present to help you.'"

Tinga grinned again and touched one of his pockets before continuing:

"He told me that his granddaughter had gone to the dance with some friends. But when coming home they did not see her. I thought it was very sad that the old man should go on thinking that he would see his granddaughter again. He has sworn that he will no more eat food until she is found. And so he will die. And so of course I had to tell him that I did not



think he ever would see his granddaughter again."

"You told him that?"

"It is what I said," replied Tinga complacently. "And now I think I must go home. The fever only left me last night and I do not feel so very much strong for any more begging today."

He set off along the side of the road on all fours, but Davis kept up with him.

"You're not a Donga man yourself, are you?" asked Davis, in an attempt to establish where Tinga's sympathies lay.

"No. Dongas are rough people. I am not a Donga and I am not a Nyankwa. In fact I do not know what I am. But the Dongas are my good friends."

He paused in his tunnelling movement to ensure that the contents of his pocket were still secure, twisted up his head to give Davis another grin, and continued along the street.

"What else did you tell Braima Donga?"

"He is mourning his granddaughter so he will not be able to go to work tomorrow. And the labourers—I do not think they will go to work either. They are very angry. They have all sworn that before they do anything else they will first solve this mystery. You may like to tell this to your friend the white man, so that he will get chance to find other labourers. I should like to do something for him. He gave me a shilling once."

It was impossible to guess how much Tinga knew and how much he had told Braima Donga. He had heard Komfo Kabachi screaming his head off, but the shutters had been closed and the rest of the discussion, between Davis and his uncle, had been in low tones. Nevertheless, in so far as his own part in the affair was concerned, it seemed to Davis a necessary precaution to make a bid for Tinga's silence.

The alleyway leading off Cow Lane to the Krontihene's house was temporarily deserted when they turned into it.

•“I am going to England soon,” said Davis, and the little cripple listened expectantly, rising to his sitting position. “My uncle has promised. You and I have known each other a long time. I want to give you a small present so that you will not have to go out begging again until you are quite strong. Here is my present.” He put a pound note into Tinga's outstretched hand. “Just before I go I will give you another present, if you are still not strong enough to go out begging. You must keep inside until you are quite well.”

“White man's friend, thank you!” Tinga, smiling broadly, gave him a brisk salute. “You are very generous. Everybody has been very generous to me today. They are perhaps very glad to see me again after my fever. Perhaps they thought they would not see me again, like the old man's granddaughter. But it will be some time before I can go out again begging. I will take your advice. So any presents people like to give me while I am recovering . . .”

They went into the compound together. Davis hoped he would manage to get away soon, since otherwise Tinga's convalescence seemed likely to prove expensive.

## XXII

ALL that Sunday morning and afternoon Fenton did not leave the bungalow. The two or three hours of darkness which remained after Davis's departure he spent in a stupor of physical and mental exhaustion. Even Nunoo's usually expressionless face showed concern when he came in to lay the breakfast table. "I think you sick small," he said. "I think it good if you see doctor."

"I'm all right," said Fenton.

He was unshaved and unwashed, the breakfast went uneaten, and afterwards he spent the time in his chair or walking up and down the sitting-room. Sometimes he caught sight of part of the town through the windows but he turned from it in disgust. He knew all he wanted to know about it now. He was revolted and sickened. Even Davis coming here to bribe him as if he were one of them—that was what he had got for mixing with the town. He had been dragged down, as Rita said. All day the prospect of having to resume his place in the yard next morning before Braima Donga and Davis and the rest confronted him as an impossible task. He wanted to get away from Nyankwa and hide. He had no motive for going on at all. Here in this bungalow Hobden, by ways which must ever remain a mystery, had reached the same point. But Hobden had had a gun.

At six o'clock he was lying on his bed when there was a knock at the front door. He kept still. It would probably be Bull or Mackinnon or somebody who wanted to see him about last night's affair at the dance. Whoever it was could go on

knocking. He would not stir. Nunoo would not come either, because earlier he had become exasperated by Nunoo padding about the house and following the same routine as if nothing had happened, and he had ordered him to stay in the back compound until he was called. So the person at the door could go on knocking and in five minutes or so would no doubt give up and go away.

"Is anyone at home?" asked Rita Van Huyt. "Can I come in?"

She was the last person he expected and also the last person he was in any condition to meet. He continued to lie still. There was no point in seeing her again. After last night he had no right to want to see her again.

Sharply the knock was repeated.

"Come on, Philip, open up. I want to see you. I've got some news."

"I'm coming," he said.

He got up from the bed, brushed back his hair and arranged his clothes somewhat more presentably. When he opened the door she was standing on the top step a little grimly, her hands in the pockets of her frock, the white, red-belted one.

Her eyebrows lifted.

"You're in a bit of a mess," she said. "Whatever's wrong?"

"I'm all right. Hangover from last night, that's all."

He stood aside to let her pass.

"To me you look perfectly ghastly. Why ever didn't you tell someone? What you want is a doctor. Bill Tewkes went back to Adantakrom this morning. He could have taken you in."

"Tewkes!" He laughed shortly and she again looked at him before taking a resolute step across the threshold.

"Why have you come?" he asked, standing before her. He felt ill. The effort of getting up to let her in had brought him out in a sweat. He sat down, not in the chair beside her, but on the wooden settee.

"Why have you come?" he repeated as she still looked at him.

"It's about Dai Williams. They've been on at him all day trying to get him to apologise. So far he hasn't agreed. But they think he deserved what he got." She hesitated. "In fact we all do . . . I thought you might like to know."

He put his hands up to his eyes and drew them down wearily across his face.

"Thank you," he said, "but I'm afraid I couldn't care less what they think."

She ought to go now, he told himself. He wished she would go instead of continuing to sit there, watching him. Her solicitude was useless. Nothing could come of it.

"I don't suppose you're in a condition to care about anything just now," she said. "What I'm going to do is to send the car round at once to run you into Adantakrom. I'll phone the hospital to expect you. You'll have to lie up for a few days."

"There's no need for that. I'll be all right. I didn't sleep last night—all this excitement with Williams shook me up—I'll be all right tomorrow. Oh, my God!" he began shouting, getting up and staring at her. "Can't you see that all I want is to be left alone? I don't care a damn for their apologies. I'm finished with them—with Nyankwa—everything."

"You're ill," she said quietly. "You'd far better do as I say."

"Ill?" He gazed at her. Suddenly, recklessly, he wanted to shock this girl who would soon be returning to England, to a

life of fullness and well-ordered security. "Ill? Of course I'm ill! Anyone would be ill after what I've seen." He began pacing to and fro. "Murder! Down at the fetish grove last night. Tell them that! Tell Tewkes. He's the one you ought to be ringing up. And tell your father. It was human sacrifice, all on account of this case."

"Philip!" She had stiffened in her chair and her face was tense. "You're—you're very ill. You're——"

"Mad? Delirious? I wish I was." He dropped on to the settee. "You might as well know. I don't care who knows now. I was in the yard last night. I thought they were thieves. I chased them. One of them had a sack. He dropped it when the train came. Then I saw . . . I can see it now." His voice rose. "I shall never be able to see anything else."

"But what happened?"

"I ran. Ran like a frightened rabbit. Funk! That's what it was. Pure bloody funk. Tell them that too. They'll love it. I've been here ever since. . . . I said I was finished. Now you know why." He looked at her defiantly. "Why don't you go? You ought to be passing the word on. Otherwise you're an accomplice. Like me." f

There was an interval before she spoke. Finally she lowered her eyes and said, so quietly that the words scarcely carried:

"I am like you. I've run away too."

"What's that? You've run away? Oh, no! Your going to England and leaving your father is no parallel at all." He was taking an insane, sadistic pleasure in blackening his own conduct and hurting her as well. "It's the best thing you can do. He deserves to be left. He's caused the whole thing. But for this case . . ."

"I don't mean that. I ran from this bungalow two—three—months ago."

"Two or three months ago? You mean when Hobden—you mean you came over here with the others?"

"No. I was here before they came." She drew in her breath. "I saw him do it."

"You——" He bent forward. "But how could you have seen him? I don't understand."

She sank her head forward into her hands.

"How could you have seen him?" he insisted.

She did not immediately reply and when she looked up her expression was determined and she began speaking out in a hard, crisp tone which had a ring of defiance as if she were defending herself against all comers.

"You're sorry for yourself because you discovered something and ran away and never told anybody. How would you feel if you'd caused a man to kill himself? Not deliberately, of course. I can see now I ought to have known the effect I was having upon him, here in Nyankwa. But it didn't seem wrong to me then to let him take me round the golf-course, to crack a few jokes with him, to show interest in his plans for retirement which he was always talking about, to behave in what anywhere else would be a perfectly normal way to an old man you feel a bit sorry for . . . I could see what my father had come to. And Mike Hobden—I suppose I thought I could brighten things up a bit for him. Yes!" Her eyes flashed at him. "You can laugh at that now."

"Rita, I——"

"Well, if not you, there are plenty of others who would. Proper little innocent, wasn't I? Anyway, after golf one day, when Father was on one of his trips to Kurakessie, he offered me a lift home. And then in the car he said would I come in for a drink. We'd been in here several times, Father and I. Hobden used to give small drinks parties and so on. So I

agreed. We sat talking a bit. I was in this chair, where I am now. He had to get the drinks himself. His boy had gone to town, he said. He'd sent him—that's obvious now. It got dark. I said I'd better be going. Then, if you please, he asked me to marry him."

*"Marry him?"*

"Oh yes!" She gave a wry smile. "It was a strictly honourable proposal, I assure you. Well! I forget what I said, exactly. 'A joke's a joke, Mikel'—something like that. And then," she hesitated, "his advances became rather less honourable."

Again she hesitated, while Fenton in the fading light continued to lean forward on the settee.

"It was all quite absurd," she resumed; "he began to say all the usual nonsense. He seemed to think I'd been leading him on. He said I'd given him encouragement. Even then I couldn't take him quite seriously, until he started taking hold of me. I kept telling him not to be an idiot. There was a struggle. I managed to get an arm free and gave him one across the face with everything I'd got. That sobered him up, or made him more crazy, whichever way you look at it. He let me go. He looked at me and dashed into the bedroom. I was a bit breathless and he'd torn my dress. Before I could get away he came back with a gun in his hands. 'All right, you little bitch,' he said. 'You'll remember this for the rest of your days.' He put the gun to his head and there was a bang as if the whole world had blown up."

She paused, staring at the floor.

"Jolly, wasn't it?" she said crisply, lifting her eyes again. "There he was—what was left of him! It was fairly dark, thank God. I expected the room to fill with people. But nothing happened. Nobody came. He just lay there. I must



have waited ages. I meant to give the alarm—run over to the club or something. But then I thought better of it.”

“But you hadn’t done anything.”

“Thank you! But how do you suppose I could have stayed on in Nyankwa, with all that? I wasn’t leaving without Father. At least, that’s what I thought then. And it was bad enough staying, anyway. You’ve seen what it’s been like at the club. What it’s been in the house you can guess. She’s been coming sometimes, you know. All very discreet . . . but I’ve heard the car. . . . Add to all that my seeing Hobden shoot himself, and my having to say *why* he shot himself, and you’ll see why I thought better of being first with the news. There are limits to what one can stand. You know Nyankwa. It wouldn’t have taken them long to start whispering among themselves that I’d shot him myself—whatever the verdict.”

“So you kept quiet?”

“Yes. I went out of the house the back way. The front seemed a bit exposed, although it was dark. And I took the glass I’d been using too. I couldn’t have left that for anyone to find!”

“The police were on at me next morning. They knew I’d been with him on the golf-course and so I was the last person to see him. I said he’d dropped me off at the top of the road and I’d walked home. They were quite satisfied. They asked me if I’d noticed anything odd about him, of course. I said no. I said the same at the inquest.”

“I see. . . . So Nunoo had nothing to do with it after all.”

“Hadn’t he? You’d better know the whole story. I had a gold bracelet.” She fingered her wrist. “When I got to the house I missed it. It must have fallen off here, in the struggle. The clasp wasn’t all that strong. Anyway, I couldn’t return to look for it. You can imagine—I didn’t sleep much that night.

And as soon as the police came next morning I asked them straight out, had they found my bracelet?—because I'd lost it somewhere the previous day and I thought they'd come to say they'd found it, and so on and so on. Well, they hadn't found it. They were very apologetic and said they'd come about something different. And we carried on from there.

"The bracelet never turned up," she added.

"You mean——?"

"Nunoo must have found it, here on the floor, before going over to the club, and kept it for himself. He could have flogged it afterwards for a pound or two. That's why he's always said so little. But you can see why I wasn't too pleased when you kept him on here, knowing what he did."

"Perhaps it dropped off on the road on your way home." His desire to back Nunoo still lingered.

"Perhaps. You can believe that if you'd rather."

There was silence between them. It was almost dark now and all he could see of her was the white blur of her dress. No words occurred to him. His mood of hysterical denunciation had passed, but now that she had finished, the thought of his whole situation bore down on him once more.

"So you see"—the words came across to him—"there's nothing much to choose between us, is there?"

He said nothing. There was no point in going on. He had had it all out with himself before. He had nothing to offer her, not even, since last night, faith in himself.

She came over and sat on the settee, but he drew away.

"For God's sake," he said, "you'd far better go. There's nothing you can do. Can't you see? It's hopeless. I've nothing. I've absolutely nothing. When this is all over I'll be on the streets. Your coming here and seeing me—it can't do any good."

She was close to him, but he kept looking at the darkness against the windows, not trusting himself to move.

"For God's sake," he repeated.

"I'll certainly go if you want me to." There was some return to her brisk, practical tone. "But you're making too much of all this, Philip. There are some things which can't be helped and it's stupid to worry about them. They don't worry anyone else, so why should they worry you? There are other things which can be put right quite easily. You're going in to Adantakrom now, but before you go to the hospital you'd better go and see Tewkes and tell him the whole thing. I'm coming with you and I'll tell him my story as well. That'll put us both right, won't it? They can do what they like with us then. It can't amount to much, anyway."

"But——" He turned towards her, trying to see her face. "There's no need for you——"

"Oh, yes, there is! I want to get it off my chest. And I can't expect you to do anything I haven't got the guts to do myself."

They were together in this. They knew what each other had felt; she standing here on this floor and looking down at Mike Hobden, and he out there by the railway line. He was about to reach out his hand, but she rose quickly to her feet.

"I'm going to bring the car. Are you sure you can manage the journey?"

"I'll be all right." He went with her to the top of the steps where the darkness confronted them. In the distance the light from the club-house shone with its usual persistence.

"Whatever's that down there?" asked Rita urgently. "Down towards the town. There's a sort of glow. Do you see?"

He followed the direction of her arm and stared at the

smoky red glow which was not yet large, but seemed to be growing.

"The yard!" he exclaimed. "There's a fire in the yard." He gripped her arm. "I'll have to go down."

"Philip, you're not fit——" But already he was running down the steps. The fire was too big for the office. It being Sunday there would be no lorries or wagons. But there were the petrol storage tanks.

He pulled out his bicycle from under the bungalow and set off down the hill. He had no light, but he pedalled over the rough unseen surface with an impetuous, new-found energy. At the bottom of the hill he turned along the road parallel to the railway line and was aware of figures running past him in the dark from the direction of the yard and shouting wildly. He met them in the yard also, a succession of obscure forms in flapping cloths running from the other end of the yard, running as he had run himself, almost knocking him down in their haste to be quit of the place. The glow above the trees was across the line, towards the fetish village, from where a great shouting and screaming reached his ears.

"Kwesi Amma!" he cried: "Are you there?"

"Yessah! Here am I, sah!" The little man slipped out from the shadows by the office. The lantern in his hand showed his eyes white and staring.

"What's going on here?"

"The D-Donga people, sah!" He stammered in his fear. "Just now they go for fetish village. They kill plenty people. They put fire for all the houses. They say they go kill all Nyankwa people before morning time."

He was twisting and turning his head and jerking the lantern in rapid gesticulations.

"Massa, it no be good we stay here. They drink plenty palm

wine before coming. They get knives, if we stay here they go kill us quick quick."

The words became a frenzied babble. Fenton stood appalled. The Dongas had taken the law into their own hands and ruthlessly they were going about their work of vengeance. The village must be an inferno. They would have a free hand for hours. Nyankwa's half-dozen police would be powerless. Lights darted among the trees, men with blazing firebrands held above their heads were running across the line towards the fetish grove—the monstrous image would be tumbled down and smashed to pieces—and all the time columns of flame-reddened smoke curled up into the night and the air was filled with the cries of the villagers and the exulting shouts of their attackers.

He seized Kwesi Amma's lantern and tried to open the office door, but it was locked and he had not brought the key. So he smashed open the window with a stone and reached through it for the telephone on the desk.

"Yessah!" said the policeman the other end when at last the call came through. "We know all about it, sah. The sergeant himself has gone to make investigation."

"But have you told the Superintendent at Adantakrom?"

"Yessah! Reinforcements are on their way coming."

Forty miles. By the time that even Tewkes could arrive, roaring through the darkness in his high-powered car, there would not be much left of the fetish village and its inhabitants. Fenton faced the yard again. Desperately he tried to think, but there was nothing he could do, nothing anyone could do. Uncontrollable passions of revenge and blood-lust had been aroused in primitive breasts and he could only peer anxiously at the scurry of lights and shadowy figures and endeavour to keep some sort of a watch on the company's property. It was

with this idea that he moved away from the office to see whether there was any attempt to get at the petrol tanks from behind. When he next looked along the railway line there was a man running towards him. He glimpsed the terror-stricken eyes, the gaping mouth, the glint of a raised cutlass a foot or two behind. The man hadn't a chance. In a second he would be cut down. Fenton hurled himself on the pursuer, a tall, hulking, bare-chested Donga who could have split a man's skull as easily as a melon. They went down together. From somewhere came a shout. Fenton's head struck against the rail and all he knew was a blinding flash.

## XXIII

THE Committee of Enquiry appointed by the Government into the Civil Disturbances at Nyankwa began its proceedings in the local court-house a week later. Survivors from the fetish village told in graphic terms how the Dongas had swept into the village soon after dark, set fire to the houses and murderously assaulted everybody in sight, irrespective of age or sex. The exact death-roll was never known. But the Committee's report stated that the remains of between forty and fifty mutilated or charred bodies had been found in the vicinity of the razed village. It was assumed that these included Komfo Kabachi, the chief fetish priest, and his principal assistants, who were never seen again.

In a short statement given to police officers at his bedside Fenton described the finding of the child's body by the railway line the night before. The doctor cut short the interview after five minutes when signs of excitement in the patient began to appear. Fenton had in fact been unconscious most of the next day and it was only at his own insistence, after he had emerged from pain and delirium to a period of temporary lucidity, that the police officers had been admitted at all.

When read out in court the statement produced a stir, but it was overshadowed by the evidence of two of the saw-mill's European staff who, coming along the line from the timber yard to get a closer view of what was going on, had been just in time to see Fenton jump on the attacking Donga. They told the Committee of Enquiry and they told the club.

"The Donga was twice his size and brandishing a cutlass. He ran off when we appeared and when we picked Fenton up we thought he was dead. . . . There's one man who owes him his life, no doubt about that. . . ."

"High tribute," the Committee reported, "is due to Mr. Philip Fenton of the Sobosso Mining Company for the courage he displayed."

He did not learn till later that the room where he lay for a week in a state of semi-coma was in the Van Huyts' house. He had been taken there from the timber yard at the insistence of Rita, who had driven down later that night to see what was happening. When he was sufficiently out of danger to be moved from Nyankwa she gave him a smiling good-bye and said they would meet again soon. But he was still permitted to talk for only a few minutes and he was in no condition to think much of his circumstances. He was taken down by ambulance to the hospital at Latuba and there, amid the white walls and white-coated attendants, he was conscious only of a great peace, of a sense of deliverance. His experiences at Nyankwa recurred to him, but he thought of them not with any distress or remorse, but with relief that they could no longer trouble him. He would think of Rita, but his memories on that score also were distant and detached. The blow on his head had delivered him from Nyankwa, ended his associations with it, and he could not believe that for him Rita had a part in any other scheme. She belonged to a phase in his life which had finished and from which there could be no carry-over. His future was something he could delay thinking of without difficulty and he did not need the daily adjurations of the doctor that he was doing fine, that he was not to worry, that all he needed was a good long holiday at home. Sooner or later, he supposed, they would put him on a ship, and to what



would happen to him at the other end he was indifferent. His mind was played out and refused to apply itself to such questions. There was nothing to weigh on it now. He had told them what he knew and he had saved a man's life. The account was square.

On the day he was allowed to get up and sit on the hospital veranda overlooking the harbour he had a visit from Davis, who had recovered all his self-assurance and was as smart and polished as he had ever been.

"I am sailing for England tomorrow," he explained, "and I thought I should come and say good-bye to you, sir."

"Yes?" Fenton was not much interested. He could not regard Davis as other than an unwanted reminder of all that was past and which he had no desire to recall.

"Yes, sir. My uncle has once more left Nyankwa. The State Council has refused to continue the case. They said that with the fetish destroyed and all the priests killed they would have no chance. So my uncle has decided to retire from Nyankwa affairs and finance my higher education instead. It is very fortunate for me, sir."

"Of course. You must be glad to have your future so well secured."

"Yes, sir. How are you getting on, sir?"

"Pretty well, thanks." He looked out at the harbour and once more began wondering what lay beyond for him. He could thank Davis for that; Davis whose prospects lit up his eyes and put a gloss on his cheeks and gave him sufficient self-confidence to come in here with his farewells.

"Before going I want to apologise to you, sir. I should not have come along to see you that night as I did. But I was forced."

"It really doesn't matter. And you wouldn't have given me

the message unless—unless you'd been forced again, would you?"

Davis grinned.

"No, sir. Thank you, sir." He raised his hand in a semi-salute, smiled again broadly, and went away along the veranda, fingering his Old Latuban tie and swaggering a little in his new tweed jacket and grey flannels which he wore as the uniform of his new status—the scholar *en route* for England.

Two weeks later Fenton went on board himself. Rita had written to him from Nyankwa to say that he could expect to find her and her father on the same ship. But he did not go off in search of her when he got up the gangway; he viewed their meeting with trepidation, for he still had nothing to offer. He had no right to approach her at all.

The meeting occurred eventually in one of the corridors below deck just before the ship sailed. She gave him a laughing welcome, saying she had been looking for him all over the ship and that she thought he must have been left on shore. "Come up on deck. We can't talk here."

He followed her. Van Huyt was not in sight and Fenton made him the subject of his first remark as they leaned over the rail.

"So your father decided to leave after all."

"He had to. The whole story came out during the enquiry and it seems the Government has certain powers of deporting undesirable Europeans. . . . Tewkes had a talk with him and he didn't wait to argue. I certainly never thought of that as a solution! He's cured of Nyankwa, anyway."

"I see." As the end of the jetty slid past them he thought of the Van Huyts' house in Nyankwa left unguarded against the encroachments of the forest. But the forest, perhaps, had been

cheated of one prey. "I suppose all this means a reprieve for the Sobosso Mining Company."

"Yes. They'll be able to borrow the money, now that the case has collapsed. You don't want to go back there, do you?"

"No. I've finished with Nyankwa. Most people have, apparently. Your father, the Krontihene, Davis . . . we've all done our best for it, in a way, and given it up in disgust. I wonder what will happen to it now."

She made no comment and they continued to look towards the coastline, which was nearly colourless beneath the heavy grey clouds reaching back beyond it.

"There goes the last of it, anyway," she said. "I can't say I'm shedding any tears."

The breeze across the open sea was ruffling her hair and her expression was happy. He was envious of her jubilation, and he concentrated his gaze on the stretch of sea to Latuba which was widening with the heavy beat of the engines below.

"Cheer up, Philip. I know what you're thinking about. Your next job. But you don't have to worry. Father will get you fixed up."

"That's quite impossible." He had feared something like this and it was the one thing he was prepared to meet.

"It's not impossible at all. He owes it to you, Philip. He couldn't do less. The whole thing goes back to him."

"It's quite impossible," he repeated. "I've got to make my own way. Surely you see that." His voice became insistent. "I'll manage it somehow. Things won't be so difficult now. And in a year or so, when I've got somewhere, I'll—I'll let you know," he concluded.

It was as far as he felt entitled to go. If she wanted to wait, he was giving her the opportunity. He looked down at her, waiting for what she would say.

“I suppose that would be best,” she replied presently. “It’ll give us both a chance to clear our ideas. Besides; I shall have to look after Father and that’s going to be a full-time job, for a while at least.” She smiled up at him. “Let’s go below for a drink. We deserve to celebrate, all things considered.”

